King Asoka and Buddhism
Historical & Literary Studies

Edited by Anuradha Seneviratna



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King Aśoka, the third monarch of the Mauryan dynasty in the third century B.C., was the first ruler of a unified India and one of the greatest political figures of all time. After he embraced the teachings of the Buddha, he transformed his polity from one of military conquest to one of Dharmavijaya—victory by righteousness and truth. By providing royal patronage for the propagation of Buddhism both within and beyond his empire, he helped promote the metamorphosis of Buddhism into a world religion that spread peacefully across the face of Asia.

The present collection of essays by leading Indological scholars draws upon both the inscriptions and the literary traditions to explore the relationship between King Aśoka and the religion he embraced. In highlighting the ways in which Aśoka tapped the ethical and spiritual potentials of rulership, these papers deliver a message highly relevant to our own time, when politics and spirituality often seem pitted against one another in irreconcilable opposition.

Contents: Richard *Gombrich: Aśoka-The Great Upāsaka;* Romila Thapar: *Aśoka and Buddhism as Reflected in the Aśokan Edicts;* Ananda W.P. Guruge: *Unresolved Discrepancies between Buddhist Tradition and Aśokan Inscriptions;* N.A. Jayawickrama: *Aśoka's Edicts and the Third Buddhist Council;* Anuradha Seneviratna: *Aśoka and the Emergence of a Sinhala Buddhist State in Sri Lanka;* John S. Strong: *Images of Aśoka;* Ananda W.P. Guruge: *Emperor Aśoka's Place in History.*

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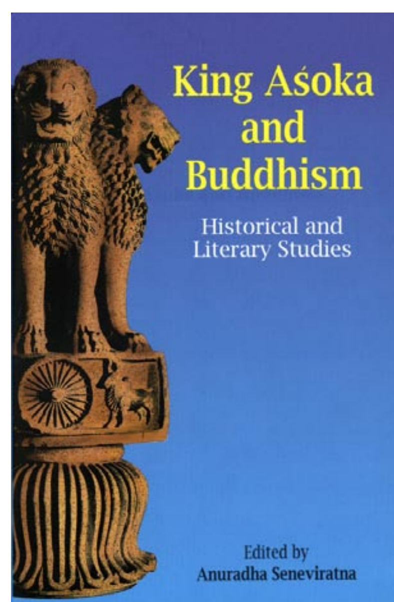
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Editor's Preface

A LARGE NUMBER OF INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARS agree that Emperor Aśoka of India in the third century B.C. was one of the greatest conquerors who later achieved the most difficult conquest of all — the conquest of himself — through self-conviction and his perception of human suffering. After embracing the Dhamma of the Buddha as his guide and refuge, he transformed the goal of his regime from military conquest to conquest by Dhamma. By providing royal patronage for the propagation of Buddhism both within and outside his vast dominion, he helped promote the metamorphosis of Buddhism from one among many sects of Indian ascetic spirituality into a world religion that was eventually to penetrate almost all of southern and eastern Asia.

The present collection of papers by leading Indological scholars is intended to highlight different aspects of the close connection between the political and religious life of this exemplary Indian ruler. By underscoring from different angles the ways in which Aśoka tapped the ethical and spiritual potentials of rulership, and did so in ways which did not violate the religious convictions of those who did not accept the same system of beliefs that he himself endorsed, these papers, in their totality, deliver a message that is highly relevant to our times, when political and ethical goals so often seem to ride a collision course and religious tolerance is threatened by fanaticism and belligerent fundamentalism.

This volume arose out of a seminar on King Aśoka and Buddhism that had been scheduled to be held at the Buddhist Publication Society in March 1987, but had to be cancelled

owing to the inability of certain scholars from abroad to attend on time. Fortunately we were able to receive their contributions, and the editor has undertaken to provide a paper on Aśoka's influence on Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

I am beholden to Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi for the trust and confidence he placed in me when he appointed me the editor of this volume. I owe a special word of thanks too to the eminent scholars who have contributed to this work.

ANURADHA SENEVIRATNA

Editor's Note

TWO VARIANT SPELLINGS ARE USED for the subject of this volume — Aśoka and Asoka. The former is used as the standard spelling, the latter when quoting from or referring to sources in Pali, which does not include the sibilant ś in its alphabet. In other respects I have allowed the authors' spellings of proper names to stand, and the differences in methods of transliteration account for occasional differences in the spelling of the same names.

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The map "Aśoka's Indian Empire" is taken from *Aśokan Inscriptions* edited by Radhagovinda Basak (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1959).

The map "Areas to which Buddhist Missions were sent" was drawn by J.F. Horrabin and is taken from *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* by Romila Thapar (Oxford University Press, 1961).

1
Aśoka — The Great Upāsaka

Richard Gombrich



The most important Buddhist layman in history has been the Emperor Aśoka, who ruled most of India for the middle third of the third century B.C. On the capital of one of the pillars Aśoka erected is beautifully carved a wheel with many spokes. This representation of the wheel of Dhamma which the Buddha set in motion is the symbol chosen to adorn the flag of the modern state of India. The lions on the same capital are on the state seal. Thus India recalls its "righteous ruler." Aśoka is a towering figure for many other reasons too, but we confine ourselves to his role in Buddhist history. Before Aśoka Buddhism had spread through the northern half of India; but it was his patronage which made it a world religion.

Aśoka was the grandson and second successor of Candragupta, who founded the Mauryan dynasty and empire about 324 B.C. We have very little evidence about the precise extent of what Candragupta conquered and even less about the activities of his son Bindusāra, but Candragupta's empire may already have covered northern India from coast to coast and probably comprised about two-thirds of the sub-continent. Bindusāra and Aśoka extended it further to the south. The capital was the city of Pāṭaliputta, which had been founded as the new capital of Magadha fairly soon after the Buddha's death; modern Patna is on the same site. The Mauryan empire was a political

unit of a new order of magnitude in India, the first, for example, in which there were speakers of Indo-Aryan languages (derivatives of Sanskrit) so far apart that their dialects must have been mutually incomprehensible.

Aśoka's precise dates are controversial. Eggermont, the scholar who has devoted most attention to the problem, proposes 268–239 B.C.[1]

For our purposes, there are two Aśokas: the Aśoka known to modern historians through his inscriptions, and the Aśoka of Buddhist tradition. We shall say something about each in turn and then try to reconcile the two.

1. Aśoka's Inscriptions

Aśoka left a large number of inscriptions on rocks and pillars. He dictated his edicts to scribes in Pāṭaliputta and had them carved in conspicuous places throughout his vast kingdom. They record a personality and a concept of rule unique not merely in Indian but perhaps in world history. The idea of putting up such inscriptions probably came to Aśoka from the Achaemenid empire in Iran; but whereas Darius has boasted of winning battles and killing people, and considered his enemies products of the forces of evil, Aśoka recorded his revulsion from violence and his wish to spare and care for even animals. He had begun in the usual warlike way, but after a successful campaign in Kalinga (modern Orissa) he had a change of heart. He publicly declared his remorse for the sufferings he had caused in the war and said that henceforth he would conquer only by righteousness *(dhamma)*[2] This remarkable conversion from what every proper Indian king considered his *dharma* to a universalistic *dhamma* of compassion and, ethical propriety presumably coincided with the conversion to

Buddhism which Aśoka announced in what may well be the earliest of his edicts. In that edict[3] he says that he first became an *upāsaka,* a Buddhist lay follower, but did not make much progress for a year; then, however, he "went to" the Saṅgha and made a lot of progress. We cannot be sure just what he meant by "going to" the Saṅgha — the Buddhist tradition that it meant going and living with monks may be an exaggeration — but in any case it clearly involved getting to know more about Buddhism.

Almost all of Aśoka's inscriptions are about *dhamma.* By this he did not mean specifically Buddhism, but righteousness as he understood it. And it is clear that his understanding was greatly influenced by Buddhism. The best traditions of both Buddhism and Indian kingship coincided in Aśoka's declared support for all religions. This support went far beyond passive toleration: he dedicated caves to non-Buddhist ascetics,[4] repeatedly said that Brahmins and renouncers *(śramaṇa)* all deserved respect, and told people never to denigrate other sects but to inform themselves about them.'

Aśoka abolished the death penalty.[6] He declared many animal species protected species[7] and said that whereas previously many animals were killed for the royal kitchens, now they were down to two peacocks and a deer per day, "and the deer not regularly — and in future even these three animals will not be killed."[8] (Here as so often the rather clumsy style seems to have the spontaneity of unrevised dictation.) He had wells dug and shade trees planted along the roads for the use of men and beasts, and medicinal plants grown for both as well.[8]

The influence of Buddhism appears in both substance and style. The Buddha took current terminology and adapted it to his purpose: who is the true brahmin; what should one

really mean by *kamma,* etc. Aśoka does this repeatedly with his *dhamma.* Other kings have victories; he has *dhamma* victories.[10] Other kings go on hunting expeditions; he gets much more pleasure out of *dhamma* expeditions, on which he makes gifts to brahmins and renouncers and senior citizens,[11] tours the country and finds instruction in the *dhamma.* Other kings have officials; he has *dhamma* officials to promulgate virtue and to look after such disadvantaged groups as old people, orphans and prisoners.[12] In an edict addressed to these officials[13] he tells them to follow "the middle path"—almost certainly echoing the Buddhist term—by avoiding such vices as jealousy, cruelty and laziness. In another edict[14] he says that people go in for all sorts of ceremonies on family occasions such as marriages, and women especially perform all kinds of paltry and useless rites for good luck, but the only rewarding ceremony is to practise *dhamma,* which means treating your slaves and servants properly, respecting your elders, acting with restraint towards all living beings, and making gifts to brahmins and renouncers.

This edict closely echoes the *Advice to Sigāla* and other sermons of the Buddha on lay ethics.[15] Given that Aśoka is most unlikely to have had a text available, the resemblance could hardly have been closer. Like Sigāla, Aśoka's subjects are to substitute ethical action for traditional ritual, and what they are to do is just what the Buddha recommended. The notion that the ideal king portrayed by the Buddha is the ideal layman writ large, fits Aśoka perfectly. To follow all the details one should read these wonderful human documents for oneself.[16] I shall just cite two more points at which Aśoka commends what we have identified as distinctively Buddhist values. He says: "It is good to have few expenses and few possessions."[17] And he

not only urges diligence on others, but leads by example: he attends to business at any time, whether he is eating, in the women's quarters, in his bedroom, in his litter, in the garden, or even — if our understanding is correct — on the toilet. "For I am never satisfied with my efforts and with settling business, because I think I must work for the welfare of the whole world."[18]

Near the end of his last and longest inscription,[19] after summarizing his efforts to propagate *dhamma,* Aśoka says: "People's progress in *dhamma* is achieved in two ways, by *dhamma* rules and by conviction. Rules count for little; most is by conviction." A perfect Buddhist sentiment, which I find touching in the context.

Some scholars have questioned Aśoka's Buddhism on the grounds that he never mentions Nibbāna or other key concepts of Buddhist soteriology. A consideration of Buddhist lay-religiosity, both in the Canon and after, proves that this objection is foolish. There are also certain inscriptions, apart from the announcement of his conversion, which have a purely Buddhist content in the narrowest sense. In an inscription found at the site[20] he announces that he has visited Lumbinī, the Buddha's birthplace, and remitted the village's taxes. In another[21] he says that he has doubled the size of the stūpa of a (named) former Buddha and come himself to worship at it. So Aśoka went on Buddhist pilgrimages. There are also two remarkable inscriptions addressed to the Saṅgha. In one[22] he recommends that they study certain specific texts; most but not all have been identified. In another, which has been found at three sites[23] (though badly damaged at two), he says that any monk or nun who splits the Saṅgha is to be made to wear white clothes (i.e. revert to lay status) and made to leave the monastery; the

laity are to come each *uposatha* to check that this is done. We have seen that this issue, the unanimity of the Saṅgha, is a central one in the Vinaya, and that, in lending his authority — indeed, his practical help — to the expulsion of dissidents, Aśoka is acting as the perfect Buddhist king who enables the Saṅgha to keep itself pure.

We have left to the last the passage in an inscription[24] which mentions Aśoka's missions. In it he says that he has won a *dhamma* victory by sending messengers to five kings and several other kingdoms. The kings, all of whom ruled in the Hellenistic world, the Near East, have been identified; from their dates we can deduce that the inscription was dictated in 256 or 255 B.C., and this gave modern scholarship the key to dating not merely Aśoka but the whole of ancient Indian history. Unfortunately most of the other countries mentioned have not been securely identified. An overlapping list of countries, equally problematic, is mentioned in another inscription[25] in a similar context. We shall return below to the vexed problem whether these missions correspond to the missions recorded in the Buddhist chronicles.

2. Aśoka in Buddhist Tradition

The missions had a great influence on world history. But in other respects the Aśoka who influenced later Buddhists, serving as the model for Buddhist rulers, was the Aśoka portrayed in the Buddhist chronicles. A large body of stories grew up around him. We shall, however, restrict ourselves to the Theravādin chronicles, and in particular to the account of the *Mahāvaṃsa*.[26]

Most features of the Aśoka of legend are perhaps simple-minded inflations of the truth. Thus he is said to have built

84,000 monasteries and as many stūpas; it seems that in later times almost every old stūpa was attributed to him. He is also said to have been preternaturally wicked before his conversion, killing 99 half-brothers.

The story of Aśoka's conversion is that one day he chanced to see a Buddhist novice walking down the street and was so impressed by his tranquil deportment that he conceived confidence in him and invited him in. (There is a romantic tale that, unbeknown to the king, he was his nephew; but that is not the point of the episode.) "The king said, 'Sit down, dear sir, on a suitable seat.' Seeing no other monk present, he went up to the throne."[27] This establishes that the most junior monk has precedence over the highest layman, the king. Again, significantly, the novice preaches to the king about diligence *(appamāda)*; he is thereupon converted and starts to feed monks on a vast scale. In due course Aśoka's younger brother, his son Mahinda, and his daughter Saṅghamittā enter the Saṅgha.

The lavish state patronage has an unintended consequence; it tempts non-Buddhists to join the Saṅgha, or rather, to dress up as monks. The true monks cannot co-operate with them, so no *uposatha* ceremony is held for seven years. The king's first attempt to rectify this leads to disaster when his too-zealous minister has some real monks beheaded for this non-co-operation. He then invites the venerable elder Tissa Moggaliputta, who first assures him that without evil intention there is no bad kamma. The king and the elder then proceed to the big monastery the king has founded in Pāṭaliputta, and the king cross-examines its inhabitants to weed out the non-Buddhists. (Notice that this says nothing about doctrine within Buddhism or Buddhist sect formation: the men who merit expulsion were never Buddhists at all.) Finally Aśoka

says to the elder, "Since the Saṅgha is purified, let it perform the *uposatha* ceremony,"[28] and they do so in concord. Tissa then organizes the Third Council; they compile the scriptures (by reciting them) and he composes the *Kathāvatthu,* the last book in the Pali Abhidhamma Piṭaka. In effect he thus as it were seals off the Tipiṭaka, the Pali version of the Canon, with the possible exception of the large "Collection of Minor Texts" (Khuddaka Nikāya) of the Sutta Piṭaka, the contents of which remained somewhat fluid for many centuries. The *Kathāvatthu* establishes or reaffirms Theravādin orthodoxy on a host of points, mostly minor, on which they differed from some or other Buddhist schools.

The story of the Third Council is peculiar to the Theravāda tradition; evidently it concerned only them. The story of Aśoka's intervention to purify the Saṅgha is found in other Buddhist traditions too, though with variant details. It is not corroborated by inscriptional evidence, as the inscription cited above does not say that Aśoka has actually expelled monks himself; on the other hand, it is almost certain that many of Aśoka's inscriptions have been lost—new ones are still being discovered—and the argument from silence is weak. The surviving inscription certainly proves that Aśoka took an interest in the unanimity and purity of the Saṅgha. Scholars have treated the Theravādin account with scepticism because of various implausible features in it. Certainly, it confuses the fortunes of one sect, or perhaps even just one monastery, with those of Buddhism throughout India: it is impossible to believe that no *uposatha* ceremony was held in all India for seven years, and in any case Aśoka's expulsion of pseudo-monks from one monastery would only have rectified matters in that particular *sangha*, not in the Saṅgha as a whole. It also seems odd that it should

be Aśoka, a layman, who tests monks on their doctrine. Yet this is hardly out of character for a king whom we know put up an inscription telling the Saṅgha which texts to study. It is the occupational hazard of rulers to think they know best.

Whether the story is essentially accurate or inflates a minor incident in which Aśoka did not personally participate, it serves in the Theravādin literature to complement the Vinaya, supplying the missing piece to the puzzle of the Saṅgha's regulation. Buddhist kings ever after Aśoka saw it as their duty to act as Defender of the Faith — to use the Christian phrase — by expelling malefactors to purify the Saṅgha. For a Buddhist, to defend the faith is to defend the Saṅgha.

Aśoka has been the model for rulers all over the Buddhist world. Within the next thousand years at least five kings of Sri Lanka prohibited the killing of animals.[29] In Burma, Aśoka's example has constantly been invoked by kings,[30] and Prime Minister U Nu, modelling himself on Aśoka, had innumerable small stūpas put up.[31] The great Khmer ruler Jayavarman VII (1181 –after 1215) saw himself as a "living Buddha" and in his inscriptions expressed Aśokan sentiments on the material and spiritual welfare of his subjects and announced that he had had hospitals built.[32] In eleventh-century Thailand, King Rāma Khamhaeng ordered that for urgent business he should be disturbed even on the toilet.[33] In fifth-century China, the Buddhist emperor Lian-u-thi went and lived in a monastery with monks.[34] Of course no one before the nineteenth century had access to the inscriptions, or even knew they existed; they based themselves on Buddhist literary sources. In modern times, Aśoka's precedent has been no less invoked but more distorted. The great Sinhalese Buddhist reformer Anagārika Dharmapāla, whose assumed name Dharmapāla means

"Defender of the Faith," called Aśoka's "the greatest democratic empire,"[35] while the Sinhalese polemicist D.C. Vijayavardhana, who regarded the Buddha as somehow anticipating Karl Marx, described Aśoka as "the Lenin of Buddhism."[36]

3. The Missions: Interpreting the Evidence

Curiously enough, the Theravādin chronicles do not credit Aśoka directly with what we naturally think of as his most important achievement, the dispatch of missions which established Buddhism over a far wider area, within the Indian subcontinent and beyond. According to those texts, it was the Elder Tissa Moggaliputta who sent out nine missions to "border areas." This was in c.250 B.C. Each mission was headed by an elder whom the texts name and consisted of five monks, the quorum required for conferring higher ordination in remote parts.[37] The mission to Sri Lanka was headed by the Elder Mahinda, whom Theravādin tradition considers to have been Aśoka's son; his daughter Saṅghamittā followed in due course to establish the Order of Nuns in Sri Lanka.

There is archaeological evidence to corroborate a piece of the chronicles' story. Five named monks are said to have gone to various parts of the Himalayan region.[38] In Bhilsa (= ancient Vidisā) in central India, relic caskets of the right period, the early second century B.C., have been found inscribed with the names of three of these monks and stating that they are of the Himalayan School.[39]

Nevertheless, the great Buddhologist Etienne Lamotte not only argues that these missions cannot be those to which Aśoka refers in his inscriptions, he is even sceptical whether there was a concerted missionary enterprise at all.[40] He points out that Aśoka's "*dhamma* messengers" or ambassadors of right-

eousness can hardly have been Buddhist monks, because the emperor protected all faiths and used *dhamma* to mean something much more generally acceptable than Buddhist doctrine. He argues that the lists of destinations in the Buddhist sources on the one hand and the inscriptions on the other are discrepant, though they overlap; that some of them were already familiar with Buddhism by that date; and that the dates too are discrepant.

Erich Frauwallner, on the other hand, accepts the Buddhist account in most particulars.[41] But he identifies it with Aśoka's embassies and thus holds the emperor directly responsible. He further argues that the missions set out from Vidisā in central India, where the missionaries' remains were found. He identifies the geographical names in Theravādin sources with some of those in the inscriptions, and glosses over the difficulty of the date.

On the whole I side with Frauwallner. The geographical identifications are too uncertain to help us. While Lamotte is right to point out that some of the areas visited, notably Kashmir, had Buddhists already, that does not disprove that missions could be sent there. The chroniclers, as so often happens, had no interest in recording a gradual and undramatic process, and allowed history to crystallize into clear-cut episodes which could be endowed with edifying overtones; but this oversimplification does not prove that clear-cut events never occurred. We know from the inscriptions that they did. There is a discrepancy of about five years in the dates; as the dates of Aśoka's embassies are certain, within a year or two, I suggest that we must not flinch from concluding that on this point the Buddhist sources are slightly out. Maybe Frauwallner is also right about where the missions left from, for the Sri Lankan

sources say[42] that Mahinda stayed a month at Vedisa (= Vidisā) before going to Sri Lanka.

Aśoka's ambassadors of righteousness would certainly not have been men travelling alone. Such a mission could well have included monks, perhaps even representatives of more than one religion. So Lamotte's objection about the nature of the *dhamma* can also be parried.

The monks who composed the chronicles would not have been pleased to record that Buddhism travelled as a sideshow. Nor would it indeed have been relevant to their main purpose as chroniclers, which was to show how valid ordination traditions came to be established. I agree with Frauwallner that the missions to remote parts were probably responsible for the creation of several of the early sects, which arose because of geographical isolation. What is really most implausible, in my view, is that it should have been Tissa Moggaliputta who sent out all the missions. The strong evidence of the *Kathāvatthu* demonstrates that he was a polemicist for the particular doctrinal interpretations of the Pali school, whereas we know that Kashmir, for example, had other sects and schools (i.e. disciplinary and doctrinal traditions), not the Theravāda or *vibhajja-vāda.* Evidently Tissa Moggaliputta was the chief Theravādin intellectual of his day, and the Theravādin chronicles therefore grossly exaggerated his role in general Buddhist history. Just as he cannot have presided over the purification of the entire Saṅgha throughout India, he cannot have been the prime mover in dispatching missions throughout the known world. Indeed there is one account which does not connect him with Mahinda's mission.[43] Aśoka may well have sought his advice and secured his co-operation, but these missions, the evidence indicates, were from court to court, a product of state patronage.

Notes

1. P.H.L. Eggermont, *The Chronology of the Reign of Aśoka Moriya* (Leiden, 1956); "New Notes on Aśoka and His Successors," *Persica,* (Leiden, 1965–66).
2. Rock Edict (RE) XIII.
3. Minor Rock Edict (MRE) I.
4. Barabar inscription.
5. RE XII.
6. Pillar Edict (PE) IV. See K.R. Norman, "Aśoka and Capital Punishment," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,* no.1, pp. 16–24.
7. RE V.
8. RE I.
9. RE II.
10. RE XIII.
11. RE VIII.
12. RE V; PE VII.
13. Kalinga Separate Edict I.
14. RE IX.
15. Hammalawa Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics* (London, 1970), p. 143.
16. N.A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, eds. and trans., *The Edicts of Aśoka* (Chicago, 1959).
17. RE III.
18. RE VI.
19. RE VII.
20. Rummindei inscription.
21. Nigalisagar inscription.

22. Bhabra inscription.
23. Kosam, Sañci and Sārnāth.
24. RE XIII.
25. RE V.
26. Mahāvaṃsa (Mhv.), mainly chap. V.
27. Mhv. V,63.
28. Mhv. V,273.
29. Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon: The Anuradhapura Period* (Colombo, 1956), pp. 73 fn., 86.
30. E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague, 1965), pp. 33–36, 66–67, 93–94, 97.
31. Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Landern des Theravada Buddhismus,* Vol. II (Wiesbaden, 1967), pp. 143, 168.
32. Ibid., p. 253.
33. Professor Trevor Ling, personal communication.
34. Rahula, p. 5 fn.
35. Bechert, Vol. I (Frankfurt & Berlin, 1966), p. 128.
36. Ibid.
37. Vinaya Nidāna, para. 64.
38. Ibid., para. 71
39. Etienne Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (Louvain, 1958), p. 333.
40. Ibid., pp. 320–39.
41. Erich Frauwallner, *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature* (Rome, 1956), pp. 12–23.
42. Vinaya Nidāna, paras. 73–75; Mhv. XIII.
43. Dīpavaṃsa XII, 5ff.

2
Aśoka and Buddhism as Reflected in the Aśokan Edicts

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In the Puranic texts of the brahmins, Aśoka occurs merely as an undistinguished name in a list of Mauryan kings. From the brahmanical point of view the Mauryas were patrons of heretical sects such as the Jainas, Ājīvikas, and Buddhists and therefore little time and space was wasted on them. But in the traditions of the so-called heretical sects, these kings are depicted as major patrons. Thus the Jaina tradition associates Candragupta Maurya with the major events of the early history of the Jaina *sangha.* A parallel portrayal is given of the association of Aśoka with the Buddhist *sangha* in the Buddhist tradition. The latter is however more detailed and makes of Aśoka an exemplar for all kings who were patrons of the Buddhist *sangha.* Implicit in this portrayal is the question of the relation between temporal and sacral power: a subject which has been analysed extensively by both historians and anthropologists in recent years.

In the nineteenth century the inscriptions of Aśoka were deciphered and by the early twentieth century the identity of Aśoka was established. Because of the portrayal of Aśoka in the Buddhist tradition, historians initially tended to read the edicts merely as documents asserting his belief in Buddhism. But if the edicts are examined more analytically they not only

reflect a more complex situation but one that is also enriched by reference to the preoccupations of the contemporary scene. I would like to propose therefore that an assessment of the impact of Buddhism on the Mauryan emperor Aśoka requires analyses from many perspectives. Since he was a person of considerable public importance, such an assessment would have to consider both his personal beliefs as well as his public use of an ideology drawn from the ethical perspectives of religion — a consideration which would necessitate a familiarity with the contemporary situation in the third century B.C. in India.

It is rare in Indian history to have access to the personalized edicts of a king. In this we are fortunate in the corpus of Aśokan inscriptions, which are substantially of this nature. These inscriptions can be categorized as those which are directed to the Buddhist Saṅgha and which are fewer in number, and those which are addressed to the people at large and which constitute the majority of the edicts. The latter category includes what are referred to as the Minor Rock Inscriptions, the Major Rock Inscriptions, and the two Separate Edicts at Kalinga. It is from these that we can gather his definition of *dhamma*. What is even more fortunate in some ways is that we have versions of some of these edicts in Aramaic and Greek. These are significant not only in themselves but also in the fact that they provide us with another perspective on the concepts which he uses. It is my intention in this paper to base myself largely on the inscriptional data and to try to determine from this what might have been Aśoka's relation with Buddhism.

I would like to begin by looking at the evidence which we have for arguing that Aśoka was a Buddhist. Buddhism in this period has often been referred to as a heterodoxy in

relation to Brahmanism. There was certainly a clear-cut distinction between the two. This is reflected in the quotation from Megasthenes which refers to the category of philosophers being divided into brahmins and śramaṇas, the term *śramaṇa* referring not only to Buddhists but to the large range of non-brahmanical sects. It is also reflected in a passage from Patañjali which indicates the hostility between the two by comparing their relationship to that of the snake and the mongoose. Nevertheless, as far as the middle Ganges valley was concerned, where the state of Magadha was located, the question may well be asked as to whether in this area Buddhism was a heterodoxy or whether it was the dominant sect. Candragupta Maurya is strongly associated with the Jaina tradition and Bindusāra, the father of Aśoka, with the Ājīvikas. It would seem therefore that in this area all these religious ideologies were prevalent and popular and therefore Aśoka's exposure to them may not have been an exposure to heterodoxy but to current religious ideas. His support of any of these sects need not therefore be seen as a major departure from the norm.

Possibly his first close association with Buddhism in an administrative capacity was when he was viceroy at Ujjain. This region was developing as a major centre of Buddhist activity, which is also attested in the brief inscription preceding the Minor Rock Edict at the site of Panguraria near Roshangabad in Madhya Pradesh. According to the Buddhist tradition it was also here that his son Mahinda was born, and Mahinda's mother Devī is said to have been an ardent lay follower, thus introducing a very private element into his association with Buddhism. However, whatever this association may have been, it is not referred to in his edicts:

Eight years after he had been crowned, Aśoka campaigned

in Kalinga. The Major Rock Edict XIII records his remorse at the suffering caused by this campaign. He mentions in this edict that after Kalinga had been annexed he came close to the practice and teaching of *dhamma.* This is often taken to be a dramatic conversion to Buddhism. However, it should be kept in mind that in the Minor Rock Edict issued in his thirteenth regnal year, i.e. five years after the Kalinga campaign, he states that "I have been an *upāsaka* for more than two and a half years, but for a year I did not make much progress. Now for more than a year I have drawn closer to the Saṅgha *(sangham upagate)* and have become more ardent." The Ahraura version of the Minor Rock Edict refers to the placing of the relics of the Buddha on a platform. In Major Rock Edict VIII he states that after he had been consecrated ten years he went to the Bodhi Tree, the Buddha's tree of enlightenment *(ayāya sambodhim).* His statements suggest that there was no sudden conversion but rather a gradual and increasingly closer association with Buddhism.

This is somewhat different from the treatment of the conversion in the Buddhist tradition. No mention is made of the campaign in Kalinga in spite of the dramatic and narrative potential of such an event. Instead the conversion significantly relates to close relatives, a younger brother in one case and a nephew in another, who are responsible for showing the way to the king. There is the well known story of the wicked Candāśoka who changes to the pious Dharmāśoka which is, of course, a familiar stereotype in many such sudden conversion stories. Once the king is associated with the *sangha,* the relationship matures and reaches its fruition, as it were, in the decision to call the Third Council at Pāṭaliputra. Here the doctrine is clarified and the Theravāda position is established as

the correct doctrine. What is of significance in this event is the mutual legitimation of the emperor and the *sangha.* Temporal power is legitimized by a religious assembly and the latter is in turn legitimized by the authority of the king. One of the outcomes of the Council is missionary activity. Missions are sent not only within the subcontinent but also to the northwest, the Hellenized states in the trans-Indus region, and of course to Sri Lanka.

The later years of the emperor, according to the tradition, were filled with palace politics. Subsequent to the death of Asandhimittā, the pious chief queen of Aśoka, there are a number of episodes involving her successor, Tissarakkhā. Her machinations lead to the blinding of the king's son Kunāla, to the king's being cured of a peculiar disease, and to the harming of the Bodhi Tree. Ultimately, Tissarakkhā's evil ways are exposed and she is removed from the scene. In the last phase of his reign the king is said to have made a number of donations to the *sangha,* some of which are so magnanimous that they embarrass the ministers of state, and others which are so paltry that they suggest that the income of even the mightiest of kings can be reduced to a pittance. In the inscriptions, donations by the king are referred to only indirectly. One inscription states that the donations of the Queen Karuvāki, the mother of Tivara, are to be recorded. The donations of the Barabar caves to the Ājīvikas are engraved in the vicinity. But there is a striking absence of any record of direct donations to the *sangha.*

The inscriptions addressed specifically to the Buddhist *sangha* carry an echo of some of these events. In the Bhabra inscription the king seems to speak as an *upāsaka* and takes the unostentatious title of *rājā māgadha,* the king of Magadha,

in addressing the *sangha*. He states his faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha and in the teachings of the Buddha. He goes on to list the particular texts which he thinks are important and which he wishes monks and nuns to hear frequently and meditate upon.

Even more forceful is the Schism Edict issued at three major monastic centres, at Kosambī, Sānchi and Sarnath. It has been argued that this edict was issued after the Council of Pāṭaliputra. The king takes it upon himself to order the expulsion of dissident monks and nuns. It certainly is suggestive of an attitude towards dissidents subsequent to the correct doctrine being established. But, on the other hand, it does go rather contrary to his appeal for tolerance among all sects and opinions, which is voiced in the Major Rock Edicts. Possibly a distinction has to be made between the king in his role as a patron of the *sangha,* even though an *upāsaka,* and the king as a statesman governing an empire. As a royal patron he rises above sectarian rivalries and donates caves to the Ājīvikas even though there was hostility between them and the Buddhists. Interestingly, these donations are made in the thirteenth and twentieth year of his reign when at the same time he was travelling to places sacred to Buddhism.

The Rummindei Pillar Inscription records a visit of the king to Lumbinī. This has been associated with the statement in the tradition that he made a pilgrimage to places sacred to Buddhism. Curiously, he exempts the village from *bali,* the land tax, and reduces the *bhāga* to one-eighth, but even his piety does not permit him to totally exempt the village from all taxes, the revenue demands of the empire receiving priority. The Nigalisagar Pillar inscription records his enlargement of the stūpa of Konakamana and his pilgrimage to the site. This

is the nearest that we get in the inscriptions to a direct reference to his embellishing a stūpa and thus making a donation at the site. These inscriptions are specific to the concerns of the *sangha* and to places of Buddhist pilgrimage. They are to that extent affirmations of his adherence to Buddhism.

We now come to the Minor Rock Inscription, which raises a number of interesting questions. These are some seventeen versions either exact or approximate of this edict and doubtless more will be discovered. Unlike the Major Rock Edicts there is a greater variation in these texts: some are shorter, some are addressed to local officers, some occur only in certain places and even the language varies. The question of why certain sections were omitted remains unanswered and suggests that some sections were considered more important than others and were perhaps issued separately although within a brief time span.

The earlier part of the inscription occurs at all the sites. The latter half occurs only at seven sites and that too in a cluster in three districts of Kurnool, Bellary and Chitradurga in Karnataka. The third segment occurs only in the sites in Chitradurga. Strangely, these do not even occur across Tungabhadra in the sites of the Raichur district. It is possible that these segments were issued by Aśoka when he was actually touring in this area and were issued as after-thoughts.

The first segment is in some cases addressed to the officers of the area and the inscription therefore becomes one which is intended for the general public. This becomes amply clear in the statement that the officers are to make public its contents. He describes himself as a Buddhist *upāsaka*. It contains the controversial statement, …*yā imāya kālāya jaṃbudipassi amissā devā husu to dāni missā kaṭā*…. This has been interpreted either

as a reference to true and false gods (if *amissā* derives from *amṛṣa* meaning false) or that the gods who did not associate with men now do so (deriving *amissā* from *amiśra,* not mingled). If *deva* can be taken in its wider sense of things celestial then the second meaning seems more correct. The plural form *devā* would suggest superhuman beings. Taken in a metaphorical sense it would suggest that Aśoka believed that by following the injunctions of *dhamma,* the righteousness so generated would attract even celestial beings. This is further suggested in the next few sentences where he explains the required behaviour according to the precepts of *dhamma;* and that it is open to both the humble and the mighty.

In the second segment he again calls upon the officers and particularly the *rajuka,* the rural officers, and the local chiefs to instruct the people of the countryside, assembling them with the sound of the drum. The virtues of *dhamma* are explained as obeying mother and father, obeying teachers, having mercy on living beings and speaking the truth. These precepts are so broad-based that they did not require any religious sectarian identification. Such virtues were common to a large number of religious sects. The third segment reiterates these virtues and particularly calls on professional groups such as elephant-keepers, scribes and fortune tellers, as well as brahmins, to instruct their apprentices that they must honour their masters and that within a family relatives must treat each other with respect. This is described as an ancient custom conducive to long life. At the single site of Brahmagiri the name of the engraver, Capaḍa, is written in *kharoṣṭhi.*

The basic edict was presumably issued at the same time—namely, the 256th night on tour—and was engraved at a number of places. Why nights are mentioned rather than

days remains unclear unless the computation was lunar or was connected with the worship of the relics. The locations of the inscriptions are also not consistent. He states that it is to be inscribed on rocks and stone pillars all over his kingdom. Existing stone pillars would certainly be associated with a site and probably a site of religious importance. Were the rocks also in the vicinity of sacred sites or of populated centres? Not all these inscriptions are at important Buddhist monastic centres and some seem to have been located close to megalithic settlements. The later imposition of Buddhist centres at certain megalithic sites (such as Amarāvatī) suggests an association which may have been evolving at this time. However, the presupposition of a sacred site is not necessary to the location of these inscriptions since the text itself makes it clear that the prime purpose was to reach large numbers of people.

What is perhaps more significant about the locations of this edict is that it occurs in large numbers in the peninsula and in the north along routes leading into the peninsula. The dominant culture of the peninsula at this time was the megalithic culture. It is generally agreed that the megalithic culture was either prior to state formation or consisted of incipient states. Chiefdoms therefore would have been the recognized political forms and doubtless it was these that were gathered up into the net of Mauryan conquest. The imperial administration would thus use two avenues of control: one would be through its own officers, the *āryaputras, kumāras, mahāmātras* and *rajukas;* the other would be through local chiefs. The reference to officers and local chiefs would point to the ethic being propagated through these channels. Interestingly, the definition of *dhamma* in this edict is rudimentary and carries none of the refinements evident in the Major Rock Edicts. Possibly the reference

to elephant-keepers was to chiefs who rode on elephant back and the scribes would of course be the officials.

The reference to scribes raises another set of interesting questions. The Mauryan inscriptions in the peninsula are composed in Prakrit and inscribed in *brāhmī*. Numerically the cluster in the south is in areas which were Dravidian-speaking but had no script. Mauryan *brāhmī* was subsequently adapted to suit Tamil and the earliest post-Mauryan inscriptions are in Tamil *brāhmī*. These inscriptions would therefore have had to be read out to gatherings and possibly translated, since it is unlikely that people other than the elite would have followed Prakrit. The royal scribe Capaḍa was clearly from the northwest as he signs himself in the script of the northwest, *kharoṣṭhi*. Possibly local officers were being trained as scribes by the Mauryan administration. The additional segments to the original edict were obviously intended for the local situation. The Mauryan official was playing the important role of the intermediary between the imperial power and the local chiefs. The sites in the Karnataka were crucial to the Mauryas since this was the major gold-bearing region of the sub-continent and the Raichur doab is proverbial for its agricultural fertility.

In the first section of this edict a reference is made to people who live in the neighbouring areas also being made familiar with these ideas. It was perhaps in this context that a possible version of the Minor Rock Edict was issued in both Aramaic and Greek and was inscribed at Kandahar in southern Afghanistan which was then a major centre of Hellenistic settlement. The local population here spoke Aramaic and Greek. In this case Aśoka took the trouble to render his inscription into the local language. The edict was issued in the eleventh year of his reign. He claims that men have become more pious

since he showed them the way and the world has prospered. In explaining this he emphasizes the restraint on the killing of animals, self-control, and obedience to parents and elders. The Aramaic version carried a statement that there is no judgement for pious men. This is almost certainly a reference to the Zoroastrian concept of a final judgement when the good and evil of an individual's actions will be weighed, as part of the Zoroastrian eschatology. The Aramaic-speaking population at this time was largely Zoroastrian and therefore this statement becomes significant in terms of an appeal which emphasizes the piety of the present and its merit, rather than the agony of waiting for the final judgement. The Greek version uses the term *eusebeia* for *dhamma,* the literal meaning of which is sacred duty and can include piety or pious conduct. It was a general term and had no link with any specific religious or philosophical school.

It is curious that Aśoka makes no reference to the teachings of the Buddha particularly in an area where Buddhism had hardly reached and where therefore a specific reference would have made his intentions very clear. It does raise the question of whether he was intending to propagate Buddhism in his reference to *dhamma.* This question is perhaps better answered by looking at the larger corpus of edicts, namely, the Major Rock Edicts and the Pillar Edicts in which he defines in greater detail his understanding of *dhamma.* In order, however, to clarify the context of these edicts it is perhaps necessary to look at the historical situation in Mauryan India. In the larger corpus of edicts he was more clearly identifying himself as the ruler of an empire and speaking to his subjects. The implicit audience of these edicts is therefore far wider than that of the inscriptions discussed so far.

We are used to treating the Mauryan empire as undifferentiated territory extending over almost the entire sub-continent excluding only the area south of Karnataka. In effect, however, as I have argued elsewhere, the empire has to be seen in terms of differentiated political control. This is also partially reflected in the location of the inscriptions. There were some areas which had experienced state systems prior to the rise of the Mauryas such as the Ganges valley, Gandhara and Malwa. Magadha in particular had been the nucleus of political power controlling the Ganges valley in the preceding period under the Nandas and it continued to play that role under the Mauryas. It emerged therefore as a metropolitan area within the empire. That Aśoka referred to himself as *rājā māgadha* was not altogether an act of humility. Earlier states which had been annexed provided the core areas of the empire and tradition has it that Aśoka while still a prince was placed in charge of the administration both at Taxila and at Ujjain. The agriculturally rich regions of Kalinga, Saurashtra and Raichur with their potential as states can also be viewed as core regions. Intermediate areas were probably regarded as peripheral. The degree of political control would vary in these regions. The metropolitan area was under a highly centralized system of administration and this was doubtless what Kauṭalya had in mind when he wrote of the political economy of a state.

It was to this region that the revenue was directed and it was regarded as economically the most developed area. The set of seven pillar edicts are addressed to this region. The core areas had the potential of becoming metropolitan areas, which many of them did in the post-Mauryan period. The Major Rock Edicts are largely located in such areas. The ones at Kalsi and Sopārā indicate not so much the importance of agriculture as

the importance of trade, the first being on the *uttarāpatha* or the long-established northern route and the second being the emerging port for trade along the west coast and possibly with Arabia. The revenue from these core areas was again directed to the metropolitan state and the economy of these areas may have been reorganized for this purpose. The locations of the Major Rock Edicts also point to their becoming nuclei of trade centres. The peripheral regions would be those least tampered with by Mauryan administration as long as the revenue from them could be creamed off. There is little evidence of the Mauryan presence at megalithic sites in the peninsula except for the area of Raichur and the adjoining districts where the inscriptions are located. Western Rajasthan, Sind and Punjab do not provide Mauryan associations.

This differentiated political control is also suggested by the variations in the major economic activities of these regions. The metropolitan and core areas drew their revenue from agriculture and commerce. Mention is made of state-supervised agriculture but this did not preclude landowners and a variety of peasant tenures. Megasthenes' account suggests a fairly secure peasantry kept unarmed. Artisanal production and trade also provided revenue in taxes. It is likely that in the peripheral areas Mauryan control was concentrated on keeping the trade routes open and encouraging trade. The Kauṭalya *Arthaśāstra* indicates a concern by the state to derive the maximum revenue from commerce, which if it reflects actual practice, may almost have had a suffocating effect. Where peripheral areas provided lucrative resources such as the gold-bearing regions of Karnataka, there the Mauryan pressure is apparent. Such areas were largely the domain of forest tribes and pastoral groups with pockets of agriculturists. Forest tribes are referred

to in the edicts and in relation to these Aśokan paternalism was at its maximum.

Mauryan society shows a wide range of diversity which is reflected both in the archaeological picture and that available from literary sources. The Greek and Aramaic-speaking peoples of the northwest would have appeared as alien to those of the Ganges valley as were the megalithic peoples of the peninsula. The governance of such a diversity required both political control as well as persuasive assimilation. The machinery of political control had to be backed by force and finance. Persuasive assimilation required an ideology which would appeal to this diversity at all levels. The question then is whether Aśoka's concept of *dhamma* provided such an ideology.

The corpus of Major Rock Edicts (hereafter RE) and Pillar Edicts (hereafter PE) provide us in some detail with a picture of what Aśoka meant by *dhamma* or what has since been referred to by historians as his policy of *dhamma.* Those who observe the precepts of *dhamma* are said to be people of few faults, many good deeds, mercy, charity, truth andd purity (PE 2, 7). Where he refers movingly to having given a gift of insight, *cakkhudāne,* to people through *dhamma* he describes it as an awareness of the sins of cruelty, harshness, anger, pride and envy. Elsewhere he mentions the behaviour required of those who observe the *dhamma.* This consists of obedience to parents, elders and teachers; concern for friends and relatives; gifts to brahmins and *śramaṇas;* abstention from killing; good treatment towards slaves, servants and the poor; and moderation in attachment to possessions (RE 3, 9, 1). Perhaps to this can also be added his negative attitude to rituals, ceremonies and assemblies (RE 1, 9) and his suggestion that behaviour in

accordance with *dhamma* was preferable to the performance of ceremonies.

Repeated emphasis is given to tolerance of all sects (RE 6, 7, 12). True tolerance lies in honouring another's sect and his aim is the progress of the essential doctrine of all sects. This sentiment is in strong contrast to the Schism Edict in which he demands the expulsion of dissident monks and nuns. Whereas dissidence was not to be tolerated within the *sangha,* for the world at large dissident sects were as important as any other. He states that his concern for tolerance arises out of his involvement with the welfare of the whole world and helps him discharge his debt to his people, presumably in his role as emperor. The ultimate purpose of this is the attainment of heaven (RE 9; PE 3; Separate Edict 1). Even the officers who function well will attain heaven as will the frontier people if they follow *dhamma* as explained by Aśoka. It is curious that there is repeated reference to heaven *(svarga)* but no reference to Nirvāna or to transmigration. He argues that the purpose of the edicts is to elevate people through the observance of *dhamma* and he calls upon his specially appointed officers, the *dhamma-mahāmattas,* to explain *dhamma* to the people.

The propagation of *dhamma* is such a central concern that he denounces any interest in fame and glory and wishes only that his sons and grandsons will also advance *dhamma* (RE 4, 5, 6, 13; PE 7). It is when people follow *dhamma* that celestial beings and supernatural phenomena appear on earth (RE 4), a statement which is reminiscent of the earlier one referring to the gods associating with the people of Jambudvipa when *dhamma* is prevalent. In the same edict where he expresses his remorse over the Kalinga campaign he expresses the hope that

all future conquests will be by persuasion and *dhamma* and not by force and violence, a hope which is extended to the activities of his sons and grandsons; but he adds that should they have to use violence, their punishments should be light (RE 13). By the time of his twenty-seventh regnal year, when he issued the first Pillar Edict, he seemed fairly satisfied with the increase in the observance of *dhamma* and states "…For this is my principle: to protect through *dhamma,* to administer affairs according to *dhamma,* to please the people with *dhamma,* to guard the empire with *dhamma.*" This is the sentiment of a statesman and emperor, a man of power. His gradual obsession in the pillar edicts with what he was able to establish through *dhamma* begins to carry traces of what might have developed into an imperial cult.

The edicts are not concerned only with *dhamma.* There are substantial references to the administrative acts which bear on his perceptions of the state. He mentions the frequency of his going on tours so as to be in touch with his people (RE 8). His officers similarly have to travel and to make reports back to the king (RE 3). He declares his availability to the administration at all times irrespective of what he is doing (RE 6). He emphasizes judicial procedures and the need for impartiality before the law and introduces a respite of three days for those condemned to death. Doubtless the administrator in him did not permit the abolition of capital punishment in spite of the precepts of *dhamma.* His concern for the welfare of his subjects leads him to establish medical centres and to build an extensive network of roads lined with shady trees and interspersed with resthouses and wells (RE 2; PE 7).

The famous thirteenth Major Rock Edict, which carries his statement of remorse at the suffering caused by his campaign

in Kalinga, is interestingly omitted in Kalinga itself. This and the fourteenth edict are replaced by two separate edicts which make no reference to his remorse. Possibly it was not considered politically apposite to make this confession to the people of Kalinga. The Separate Edicts are addressed to the officers of the Mauryan administration and call upon them to concern themselves with the welfare of the people. Tours of inspection are initiated and judicial officers are required to be impartial. The well-known statement that "all men are my children" occurs in these edicts as well as the simile that the officers of the state are to the subjects as nurses are to children, looking after their well being.

The rock and pillar edicts also refer to a new category of officers instituted by Aśoka, whom he referred to as the *dhamma-mahāmattas* or officers of *dhamma* (RE 5, 12; PE 1, 7). Their functions were again linked to the welfare of his subjects. They were in part concerned with what would today be called "the weaker sections of society"—the aged, the infirm, women and children. They were also sent on diplomatic missions to the neighbouring Hellenistic kingdoms of west Asia, for their major function was the propagation of *dhamma.* In this connection they were also required to attend to the welfare of various religious sects and among these are mentioned the *sangha,* brahmins, Ājīvikas and Nirgranthas. There is an insistence in the inscriptions that donations are to be made to all religious sects (RE 8, 12; PE 7). Royal patronage, it is generally assumed, if it is to be politically effective, should be impartial. Such an attempt at impartiality is suggested by the making of donations to religious sects without attention to the hostilities prevailing among them. The *dhamma-mahāmattas* appear to have been powerful officers with special privileges,

possibly fully aware of their role in propagating an imperial ideology.

Historians over many decades have debated the question whether the *dhamma* of Aśoka amounted to a propagation of the Buddhist religion. Some have argued that it was because of the imperial patronage extended to Buddhism that it became a major religion. They argue that the teachings of the Buddha were referred to as the Dhamma and that Aśoka was using the word in the identical sense. Others have taken the opposite position that there is nothing specifically Buddhist in the *dhamma* as defined by Aśoka, for the same ethical teachings are to be found in various brahmanical Hindu sects.

To narrow the meaning of Aśokan *dhamma* to the teachings of a single religious sect is perhaps to do an injustice both to Aśoka and to the concept of *dhamma* as it prevailed at that time. The general code of ethics and rules of behaviour as defined by Aśoka are certainly familiar to Buddhist teaching and occur in Buddhist scripture. However, it needs to be kept in mind that such ideas are not unknown to Jaina teaching nor to various other śramanic sects which were popular during that period. Aśoka may well have used the phraseology from the texts which he knew best, but at the same time it was part of the currency of ethical norms propounded by various teachers. The Aśokan *dhamma* not only addressed itself to a large spectrum of opinion but drew its inspiration from an equally large body of ethical doctrine. His insistence on the honouring of all sects and his careful withdrawal from specifying particular loyalties would be an indication of this. This becomes even more pertinent in a situation where there were sectarian hostilities and antagonisms. His repetitive emphasis on the need for tolerance is suggestive of a situation where such tolerance

was largely absent. The phrase that donations were to be made to brahmins and *śramaṇas* is not a restrictive request referring only to the brahmin caste and the Buddhist monks. The compound was used as a short-hand to cover a variety of brahmanical and śramanic sects. That he himself made such donations is clear not only from the references to donations in the edicts but also from the fact that he made a major donation to the Ājīvika sect even though the relations between Ājīvikas and the Buddhists were not cordial. I have already mentioned that his references to heaven rather than to Nirvāna or to transmigration were also addressed to this larger body of belief.

The functions of *dhamma-mahāmattas* are a further indication of this wider concern. They are instructed to look to the welfare of all sects and the ones listed are quite diverse and some such as the Jainas and Ājīvikas were disapproved of by the Buddhist *sangha.* The Jainas on their side included the *Buddhasāsana* among what they regarded as the products of false knowledge. The *dhamma-mahāmattas* are also expected to explain *dhamma to* the various people in whose welfare they are involved. The officers of the administration are given the same instructions. It is curious that no mention is made of bhikkhus being associated in this work. If it had been the intention of the emperor to propagate a particular religious sect then surely the functionaries of that sect would have been associated with explaining its teachings. Even more telling is the fact that in the Aramaic and Greek inscriptions the word *dhamma* is translated as “good conduct” in the one case and as “pious conduct” in the other. Aśoka informs us that there are no brahmins and *śramaṇas* among the Yona (RE 13), the Hellenized kingdoms. If he was concerned with the propagation of Buddhism it would have been more effective to have specifically stated this.

The discussion on what constitutes *dhamma* was at this time the prevailing concern among a variety of religious and philosophical sects, which are referred to in the Aśokan edicts as *pāsaṇḍa* or *diatribe.* The brahmanical concept of *dharma* in the sense of sacred duty included the observances of rituals and sacrifices as well as social conduct in accordance with the rules of *varṇa-aśrama-dharma,* where the notion of the separate rules of caste activities was clearly delineated. The ascetic sects of the *śramaṇas* either questioned these rituals or substituted others for them. Thus many disapproved of animal sacrifice but the worship of trees was regarded as appropriate. Behaviour according to the rules of the four castes received scant attention among the śramanic sects, where the rules of social class were seen as the actual ordering of society relating as they did more closely to kinship and occupation. The śramanic sects favoured a universalizing ethic which cut across caste demarcations. The wandering ascetics, drawn from both brahmanical and śramanic sects, taught the importance of *dāna-dhamma* (charity) and *soca-dhamma* (purity), the precise terms referred to among the requirements of Aśoka's definition of *dhamma.* It would seem therefore that Aśoka was participating in the wider discussion of what constituted *dhamma,* was providing his own views in the edicts, and was clearly more sympathetic to the general śramanic definition, although at the same time emphasizing that as the ruler of a vast domain his patronage extended even to sects such as some of the brahmanical ones which did not necessarily endorse this definition. Aśoka's *dhamma,* it would seem, provided an ideology of persuasive assimilation. It arose as much from his personal conviction of Buddhist teaching as from the wider discussion of ethical precepts and from the demands of imperial policy.

That the larger corpus of edicts were the pronouncements of political authority is also evident from the title used by Aśoka. He does not refer to himself as *rājā* of Magadha but calls himself *Devānampiya,* "the Beloved of the Gods." The notion of a connection between divinity and kingship was familiar to brahmanical thinking particularly in the tradition of major sacrificial rituals associating kingship with divinity. It was, however, alien to much of the śramanic notions associated with political power. The indirect legitimation which Aśoka seeks from deities and celestial beings would have had a popular comprehension but may have been difficult to justify in the ideological framework of those sects for whom deities were irrelevant.

In arguing that we have to distinguish between Aśoka as the individual with his personal belief system and Aśoka performing the function of a royal statesman, the attempt is not to reduce the importance of the former but to insist that his policies, even if motivated by personal reasons, would have had a public repercussion and would have to be conditioned by public reaction. Aśoka used the symbols of Buddhism but saw his role in the context of a broader ideology. Such an argument requires the historian to look beyond the symbols. Thus donations, *dāna,* are at one level voluntary offerings made out of a sense of piety for the acquisition of merit, *puṇya.* At another level donations build institutions. In the context of governance, institutions can become centres of loyalty or otherwise, depending on the nature and the recipient of the donation. Welfare can also relate to piety but an imperial concern with welfare in the context of differentiated identities and economies can also speak to ideological concerns.

Aśoka's personal commitment to Buddhism and the royal

patronage which he extended to it doubtless helped to establish it in various parts of the subcontinent and in the neighbouring areas. The association with Sri Lanka was not only personal but very close, both in the sending of Mahinda and in his relations with Devānampiya Tissa. But even royal patronage has its limitations. It is interesting that in the post-Mauryan period both Buddhism and Jainism were evident in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, but despite the strong Mauryan presence in Karnataka, Jainism was the more dominant of the two. Elsewhere, as in northwestern India and the western and eastern Deccan, it is Buddhism which more rapidly becomes the established religion. In such areas Buddhist sacred centres develop along trade routes and in urban settlements linked to commerce. Inscriptional evidence points to the fact that the establishment of Buddhism in these areas owes more to the *seṭṭhi-gahapatis*, the merchants, traders, landowners and the artisanal guilds, who were all dedicated supporters of the religion and the more significant donors to the embellishment of the sacred centres.

It was during this period that the Buddhist tradition began to reflect on the relationship between Aśoka and Buddhism — a reflection which, as has been rightly pointed out, endorsed the *cakkavattin* ideal of universal kingship in Buddhist thought. Possibly the political role of Aśoka was appropriated by the tradition to a greater degree than historical reality permitted. But at the same time this reflection did underline the social idealism of Aśoka's policies, which however were set within an imperial framework. Ideology can be a driving force of history but it is not a sufficient cause of history. Nevertheless, Aśoka's ideology did make of him an emperor of rare quality in as much as he reached out to more than mundane politics.

3
Emperor Aśoka and Buddhism: Unresolved Discrepancies between Buddhist Tradition & Aśokan Inscriptions

Ananda W.P. Guruge

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1. Introduction

It was H.G. Wells, who in *The Outline of History*, said: "Amidst tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Aśoka shines, and shines alone, a star."[1] This statement reflects a widely held appraisal of this unique personality in Indian history by the informed intelligentsia of the world. The appraisal is based in general on the numerous edicts and inscriptions through which he sought to teach his subjects a sublime moral way of life. Among these edicts, the one which has won for him the highest admiration is Rock Edict (RE) XIII, which van Buitenan describes as "the most moving document of any dynamic history."[2]

Writing not earlier than five years after the event, Emperor Aśoka portrays in this Edict the dramatic change of heart he experienced on account of the havoc of death and deportation, famine and pestilence that was caused by his war of conquest against Kalinga. The text, as found at Erragudi, Girnar, Kalsi, Maneshra, Shahbazgarhi and Kandahar, runs as follows:

The country of the Kalingas was conquered by King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods, eight years after his coronation. *In this war in Kalinga, men and animals numbering one hundred and fifty thousand were carried away captive from that country; as many as one hundred thousand were killed there in action and many times that number perished.* After that, now that the country of the Kalingas has been conquered, the Beloved of the Gods is devoted to an intense practice of the duties relating to Dharma,[3] to a longing for Dharma and to the inculcation of Dharma among the people. *This is due to the repentance of the Beloved of the Gods on having conquered the country of the Kalingas.*

Verily the slaughter, death and deportation of men which take place in the course of the conquest of an unconquered country are now considered extremely painful and deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods. But what is considered even more deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods is the fact that injury to or slaughter or deportation of the beloved ones falls to the lot of the Brāhmanas, the śramaṇas, the adherents of other sects and the householders, who live in that country and among whom are established such virtues as obedience to superior personages, obedience to mother and father, obedience to elders and proper courtesy and are full of affection towards the former; even though they are themselves well provided for, the said misfortune as well becomes an injury to their own selves. In war, this fate is shared by all classes of men and is considered deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods.

Now really there is no person who is not sincerely devoted to a particular religious sect.[4] *Therefore, the slaughter, death or deportation of even a hundredth or thousandth part of all those people who were slain or who died or were carried away captive at that time in Kalinga is now considered very deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods.*

Now the Beloved of the Gods thinks that, even if a person should wrong him, the offense would be forgiven if it was possible to forgive it. And the forest-folk who live in the dominions of the Beloved of the Gods, even them he entreats and exhorts in regard to their duty. It is hereby explained to them that, in spite of his repentance, the Beloved of the Gods possesses power enough

to punish them for their crimes, so that they should turn away from evil ways and would not be killed for their crimes. Verily, the Beloved of the Gods desires the following in respect of all creatures: non-injury to them, restraint in dealing with them, and impartiality in the case of crimes committed by them.

So, what is conquest through Dhamma is now considered to be the best conquest by the Beloved of the Gods. And such a conquest has been achieved by the Beloved of the Gods not only here in his own dominions, but also in the territories bordering on his dominions, as far away as at a distance of six hundred yojanas, where the Yavana king named Antiyoka is ruling and where, beyond the kingdom of the said Antiyoka, four other kings named Turamaya, Antikini, Maka and Alikasundara are also ruling, and, towards the south where the Choḷas and Pāṇḍyas are living as far as Tāmraparṇi. Likewise here in the dominions of His Majesty, the Beloved of the Gods-in the countries of Yavanas and Kāmbojas, of the Nābhakas and Nābhapanktis, of the Bhoja-paitryānikas and of the Andhras and Paulindas — everywhere people are conforming to the instruction in Dharma imparted by the Beloved of the Gods.

Even where the envoys of the Beloved of the Gods have not penetrated, there too men have heard of the practices of Dharma and the ordinances issued and the instruction in Dharma imparted by the Beloved of the Gods, and are conforming to Dharma and will continue to conform to it.

So, whatever conquest is achieved in this way, verily that conquest creates an atmosphere of satisfaction everywhere both among the victors and the vanquished. In the conquest through Dharma, the satisfaction is derived by both the parties. But that satisfaction is indeed of little consequence. Only happiness of the people in the next world is what is regarded by the Beloved of the Gods as a great thing resulting from such a conquest.

And this record relating to Dharma has been written on stone for the following purpose, that my sons and great-grandsons should not think of a fresh conquest by arms as worth achieving,

> that they should adopt the policy of forbearance and light punishment towards the vanquished even if they conquer a people by arms, and that they should regard the conquest through Dharma as the true conquest. Such a conquest brings happiness to all concerned both in this world and in the next. And let all their intense joys be what is pleasure associated with Dharma. For this brings happiness in this world as in the next. (Emphasis mine.)[5]

It also appears in a somewhat condensed version in Kandahar and its opening paragraph is as follows:

> In the eighth year of his reign, Priyadarśī conquered Kalinga. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were captured there and deported from there, one hundred thousand others were killed, and almost as many perished. Since that time, pity and compassion gripped him, and he was overwhelmed by that. Just as he prescribed to abstain from consuming living beings, he established zeal in the organization of piety. And, behold, what the king was still more afflicted by: all those who inhabited that country, the Brāhmaṇas or śramaṇas or other followers of piety as well — those who lived there had to be concerned about the interests of the king, to revere and respect their teacher and their father and mother, to love and not to deceive their friends and companions, and to treat their slaves and servants as mildly as possible — *if, from among those who were behaving there like that, one was dead or deported, other people are also indirectly affected by this, and the king is extremely afflicted by it.*
>
> And, as with other peoples, there is no place in the country where men are not indeed sincerely devoted to one sect or another. (Emphasis mine.)[6]

In spite of its convincing candour and tone of credibility, this Edict, when analyzed vis-a-vis the plethora of legendary and literary information on Emperor Aśoka, poses a number of important issues which have baffled six to eight generations of

Aśokan scholars since the 1830's.[7] The most significant among them relates to Aśoka's connection with Buddhism.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the evidence from all available sources with a view to ascertaining the relative veracity and reliability of the three identifiable sources of information, namely: (i) the Theravāda tradition as recorded in Pali in the Chronicles and the commentarial literature of Sri Lanka;[8] (ii) the Mahāyāna tradition as preserved in Sanskrit and Chinese literary works and records;[9] and (iii) over two hundred lithic records which the Emperor had caused to be inscribed on rock faces, pillars and caves all over his far-flung empire.[10] In order to avoid the most distasteful display of unmitigated personal prejudices which had characterized the writings of several Aśokan scholars of the past,[11] no one source will be considered *prima facie* to be more reliable than another.

This rigour will be applied with equal care to the lithic records in spite of the obvious temptation to assign them a higher degree of reliability on grounds of either contemporaneity with the protagonist or immutability in transmission. A lesson learnt specially from the epigraphical extravagances of Nissankamalla in Sri Lankan history[12] is that inscriptions *per se* are no more reliable than other sources of historical information. On the contrary, they could even be more misleading.

The questions for which we shall seek answers will be the following:

1. Was Aśoka converted to Buddhism? If so, when and by whom?
2. What role did the Kalinga war play in either his conversion to Buddhism or the change of his imperialist policy?
3. How consistent were his statements in edicts and inscriptions in terms of time and place?

4. Was he actually involved in the propagation of Buddhism within and outside his empire?

2. Conversion of Aśoka to Buddhism

According to Joseph M. Kitagawa, the rulers of kingdoms and republics of northeast India extended their patronage to "heteropax sects" (i.e. unorthodox sects when viewed from the Vedic or Brahmanical standpoint) as "one way of avoiding the meddling of Brahmans (high-caste Hindus) in the affairs of the state."[13] While more evidence will be needed before one accepts this view *in toto,* the fact remains that Aśoka's ancestors were associated with Jains and Ājīvakas according to both tradition and literary sources.

The founder of the Mauryan dynasty, Candragupta, was in all probability propelled to and sustained in power by the Brahman political theoretician Kauṭilya, reputedly the author of the *Arthaśāstra.* But the Jain tradition asserts that he abdicated the throne, adopted the life of a Jain ascetic and fasted to death at Srāvaṇa Belgola near Mysore. As regards the religious affiliations of his son, Bindusāra, the Sri Lankan Buddhist records portray him as a devotee of Brahmanism — providing alms to 60,000 Brahmans daily at Pāṭaliputra. According to Greek sources, he had appealed to the Seleucid king of Syria, Antiochus I, for a Greek philosopher to instruct him. Bindusāra's wife, Dharma — the mother of Aśoka — is mentioned in Buddhist sources as a devotee of Ājīvakas and her family preceptor is named in Pali sources as Janāsana (Jarāsana, Jarasona) and in Sanskrit as Pingalavatsa. Aśoka, too, dedicated at least two caves to the Ājīvakas in the twelfth year from his coronation.[14]

What becomes very clear from these records is that at this particular time in India, and possibly even in Sri Lanka where

Pandukabhaya had built them a residence,[15] the Ājīvakas constituted a strong and vibrant religious movement. It is stated in Buddhist sources that when Aśoka was disenchanted with the Brahmans (whom he supported in continuation of his father's practice) and sought for new religious guidance, the saints and teachers whom the Emperor's men could summon were Ājīvakas, Jains and Paṇḍranga Parivrājakas. The Sri Lankan Vinaya Commentary, the *Samantapāsādika* states emphatically that for three years after his coronation, Aśoka was a follower of other sects *(bāhirakapāsaṇḍa* = non-Buddhistic).[16]

Neither tradition nor literary sources associate Buddhism with either Candragupta or Bindusāra, even though an effort had been made to trace the genealogy of the Mauryas to the kinsmen of the Buddha, the Sakyas. Thus the first Maurya emperor to come under the influence of Buddhism or to support Buddhist institutions was Aśoka.

The fact that Aśoka embraced Buddhism and gave Buddhist institutions his special patronage and support is no longer debated. Even if tradition and literary sources are discounted, the following inscriptions leave no more room for doubt.

(1) *Minor Rock Edict (MRE) I* (available in 13 versions):
A little more than two years and a half have passed since *I have been avowedly a lay follower (upāsaka) of the Buddha.* It is now more than a year since *the Saṅgha has been intimately associated with me (saṅghe upayīte)* and I have been exerting myself in the cause of the Dharma.

(2) *Same MRE (Ahraura version):*
This declaration has been made by me while I am on a tour of pilgrimage for 256 nights since *the relics of the Buddha ascended the platform (i.e. were caused to be installed by me on the platform for worship).*

(3) *MRE III, a unique text found only in a single version at Bairat (Bhabur) and now at the Indian Museum, Calcutta:*

King Priyadarśī of Magadha salutes the monks of the Saṅgha, wishes them good health and comfort in their movement, and addresses them in the following words:

It is known to you, Venerable Sirs, how far is my reverence for and faith in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha. Whatever, Venerable Sirs, has been said by the Lord Buddha, is well said. But, Venerable Sirs, I deem it proper to speak out what appears to me the way as to how the true Dharma may be of long duration.

I desire, Venerable Sirs, that the largest number of monks and nuns should constantly listen to and reflect on the following which are texts of the Dharma:

Vinayasamutkarsha or the Exaltation of Discipline;

Āryavasa or the Noble States of Living;

Anāgatabhayāni or the Fears to Come;

Munigāthā or the Song of the Hermit;

Mauneyasūtraṃ or the Discourse on the State of a Hermit;

Upatiśyapraśna or the Question of Upatiśya; and

Rāhulāvavāda or the Exhortation to Rahula, which was delivered by the Lord on the subject of falsehood.

In the same way the lay followers of the Buddha, both male and female, should listen to and reflect on the sacred texts.

This record, Venerable Sirs, is caused to be written by me for the following purpose, viz., that people may know my intention. (Emphasis mine.)

(4) *RE VIII (in seven versions):*

Now King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods, *visited Sambodhi (i.e. the Sacred Bodhi Tree at Buddha Gaya) ten years after his coronation.* Thence started these pilgrimages for Dharma.

(5) *Minor Pillar Edict (MPE) I (Allahabad-Kosambī text):*

This is the order of the beloved of the Gods.

The Mahāmātras stationed at Kauśambi are to be addressed in the following words:.

I have made both the Saṅgha of the monks and Saṅgha of the nuns united. No heretical monk should be admitted into the Saṅgha. Whosoever be it a monk, be it a nun, shall break up the unity of the Saṅgha should be made to wear white robes unworthy of the Order and to reside in what is not fit for the residence of a recluse.

(6) *MPE I (Sānchi text):*

You should act in such a way that the Saṅgha cannot be divided by any heretical monk. Both the Saṅgha of the monks and the Saṅgha of the nuns have each been made by me a united whole to last as long as my sons and great-grandsons shall reign and the moon and the sun shall shine.

The monk or nun who shall break up the Saṅgha should be made to put on white robes and to reside in what is not fit for the residence of a recluse.

For my desire is that the Saṅgha may remain united and flourish for a long time.

(7) *MPE I and MPE II (Sarnath text):*

You should act in such a way that the Saṅgha cannot be divided by anyone. But verily that monk or nun who shall break up the Saṅgha, should be compelled to put on white robes and to reside in what is unfit for the residence of a recluse. Thus should this order be communicated to the Saṅgha of the monks as well as to the Saṅgha of the nuns.

Thus saith the Beloved of the Gods.

One copy of the above document has been deposited in your office, so that it would be accessible to you. *And deposit another copy of this very document so as to make it accessible to lay followers of the Buddha.* Now the lay followers should assemble near the document every fast day in order to be inspired with faith on account of this very edict. (Emphasis mine.)

In these lithic records we have the assertion of Aśoka himself that he began as a lay follower of the Buddha; that after about a year and a half of uncommitted adherence, he devel-

oped a closer association with monks and began to exert himself in the cause of the Dharma; that he admired the teachings of the Buddha and had identified his own favourite texts which he recommended to the clergy as well as to the laity; and he played a leading role, through his new administrative machinery of Dharmamahāmātras, to prevent schisms in the Buddhist Saṅgha.

3. When, How and by Whom?

But the questions which remain yet to be solved are: *when, how* and by *whom* was Aśoka converted to Buddhism?

According to the Sri Lankan Pali sources, Aśoka embraced Buddhism in the fourth year from his coronation. The Sanskrit sources, however, are not so specific. But both depict the early years of Aśoka as rough, harsh and violent. The Pali sources speak of his wars of succession against 99 of his hundred brothers. The Sanskrit *Divyāvadāna* elaborates the ugly appearance and fierce nature of Aśoka and presents a grotesque and gruesome episode of how he converted his royal pleasance into a place of terror, horror, oppression and tragic deaths of the unwary visitors and passers-by through his agent Candagirika.[17] It also attributes to Aśoka the beheading of 500 ministers with his own sword and the burning to death of 500 court ladies. The Chinese *Aśokāvadāna* resorts to higher levels of poetical imagination in representing Aśoka as a most wicked character. These accounts of Aśoka prior to his conversion had prompted Aśokan scholars to consider them as the results of a tendency among Buddhist writers to "paint his character as black as possible in the days before his conversion so that he should appeal all the more powerfully to the world as a miracle of grace."[18]

The Sri Lankan Pali records, which according to Beni Madhab Barua, "cannot but appear to be comparatively more realistic and reliable, *chronologically sounder* and nearer the truth,"[19] have restricted the wicked past of Aśoka's life to his wars of succession which must have extended for nearly four years, i.e. the interval between his succession and his coronation.

The story of Aśoka's conversion according to these sources has hardly any dramatic element. The early years after his coronation are portrayed as uneventful and conservative. The only thing which seemed to have disturbed him in the humdrum life was the behaviour of the Brahmans who received his alms daily. His reaction was to look for some saintly teachers. His courtiers and officers produced their favourite teachers from among Ājīvakas and Nigaṇṭhas. But the emperor was unimpressed. It was by accident that he saw the young Buddhist monk, Nyagrodha, to whom he took a liking and from whom he heard a sermon on heedfulness *(appamāda).* By uttering the traditional formula of seeking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha, he became a Buddhist *upāsaka.* He began to frequent the local Buddhist temple called Kukkuṭārāma at Pāṭaliputra and there met the learned elder, Moggaliputta Tissa. From him, the Emperor learned of the division of the Buddha's teachings into 84,000 sections and decided to construct as many Buddhist vihāras in his empire — a project he completed in three years. Although he had shown utmost munificence to Buddhist institutions, he was still considered "a giver of requisites." To be an "inheritor of the religion" *(sāsanadāyādin),* one's offspring had to be ordained in the Saṅgha. This, too, was delivered in the sixth year after coronation when his son Mahinda and his daughter Saṅghamittā entered the Saṅgha.[20]

Now comes the problem of reconciling the dates of the Sri Lankan Pali sources with those of Aśoka's own inscriptions. In Pillar Edict (PE) VI (found in five versions), which was caused to be written in the twenty-sixth year after the coronation, it is said:

> *Twelve years after my coronation,* records relating to Dharma were caused to be written by me *for the first time* for the welfare and happiness of the people so that, without violation thereof, there might attain the growth of Dharma in various respects. (Emphasis mine.)

Though not specifically dated, the references made in the opening sentence to the period of two and a half years during which Aśoka had been a lay follower of Buddhism have been relied upon to establish MRE I (found in 14 versions) to be the earliest of his inscriptions hitherto discovered.[21] If this MRE is therefore dated 12 years after coronation, Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism (or in his own words "becoming a lay follower of the Buddha"), which had taken place "a little more than two and a half years" ago, has to be dated between the eighth and ninth year after his coronation. This date fits perfectly with the period of remorse and repentance following the Kalinga war as so eloquently and movingly described in RE XIII. It also fits the two events dated in the inscriptions in the tenth year after coronation: namely, his pilgrimage to the sacred Bodhi Tree (RE VIII) and the commencement of his role as the teacher of Dharma (MRE IV found in Greek and Aramaic near Kandahar): "Ten years having passed since his coronation, King Priyadarśī has been showing *piety — eusebeia* — to the people" (Greek) and "Ten years having passed, it so happened that our lord King Priyadarśī, became the institutor of Truth" (Aramaic).

If we had just one source of information — either the literary sources or the inscriptions — there would have been no

problem. Nor would there be a difficulty if one accepts either one of these sources and rejects or ignores the other. It is obviously difficult to reject or ignore the inscriptions. The early Aśokan scholars were quick to reject the literary sources in general. But the indispensability of the Sri Lankan Pali sources for even the identification of Aśoka with Priyadarśī[22] of the inscriptions, on the one hand, and for interpreting the names and places engraved on reliquaries of Tope No. 2 of Sānchi group and Tope No. 2 of Sonari group on the other, establishes their reliability beyond any doubt. Hence the need to delve deeper into where the two sources of information disagree.

4. Major Discrepancies in Events and Dates

As we have seen above, the events relating to Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism and his involvement in the promotion of *Dharma* (as he called it in his inscriptions) and *Buddhadhamma* (as Buddhist sources specify) have been differently described and dated in the literary sources and the inscriptions.[23] The discrepancies become clear when the data from the two sources are tabulated as shown in Table I.

Table I

Year After Coronation	*Information from Sri Lankan Pali Sources*	*Information from Aśokan Inscriptions*
4th	Conversion by Nyagrodha.	
5th–7th	Construction of 84,000 Vihāras.	
6th	Mahinda becomes a monk under Moggaliputta Tissa and Saṅghamittā becomes a nun.	

6th	Aśoka intervenes in the suspension of ecclesiastic actions of the Saṅgha.	
8th		Kalinga War followed by remorse and repentance (RE XIII).
9th–10th		Lay follower of the Buddha but without much exertion (MRE I).
		Pilgrimage to sacred Bodhi ‘ Tree (RE VIII).
		Begins teaching the Dharma to the people (Greek/Aramaic versions of MRE IV).
		Provides in bordering territories (Choḍa, Paṇḍya, Sātiyaputra, Kerala, Tāmraparṇi, Greek kingdom of Antiyoka and territories adjoining it), medical treatment for human beings and animals; grows medicinal herbs there; digs wells and plants trees along the road (RE IV).
10th or 11th		*Saṅghe upayīte:* close association with the Saṅgha (MRE I), Tour of the empire lasting 256 days (MRE I).
12th		Beginning of the practice of inscribing edicts for the propagation of Dharma. Orders Rajjukas and Prādesikas to set out on circuits every five years both for inspection and for the special purpose of preaching the Dharma (RE III).
13th		Creates the post of Dharmamahāmātra (REV).
14th		Enlargement of the Stūpa of Buddha Kanakamuni (PI II).

17th	Gets concerned over indiscipline and laxity in the Saṅgha; commences the purification of the Saṅgha, which results in the Third Buddhist Council at Pāṭaliputra under the presidency of Moggaliputta Tissa.	
18th	Sends missions to propagate Buddhism: Mahinda to Sri Lanka, Majjhantika to Kashmir and Gandhara; Mahādeva to Mahisamaṇḍala (Mysore?); Rakkhita to Vanavāsa; Dhammarakkhita the Greek to Aparantaka (i.e. Western India); Mahādhammarakkhita to Mahārāshtra; Mahārakkhita to the Greek country; Majjhima to the Himalayas;. Soṇa and Uttara to Suvaṇṇabhūmi (Lower Burma and Thailand?).	
19th	Saṅghamittā sent to Sri Lanka with a sapling of sacred Bodhi Tree to found the Order of Nuns.	Donates the Khalatika Cave to ascetics to enable them to live above the flood level during rainy season.
20th		Pilgrimage to Lumbinī, the place where the Buddha was born (PI I). Pilgrimage to the Stūpa of Buddha Kanakamuni (PI II).
26th	Moggaliputta Tissa's death.	Writing of Pillar Edict IV and V, Pillar Inscription I.
27th		Writing of Pillar Edict IV (the last of his dated inscriptions).
29th	Queen Asandhimittā's death.	
32nd	Elevation of Tissarakkhā to rank of Queen.	
34th	Tissarakkhā caused the sacred Bodhi Tree at Buddha Gaya to be destroyed on account of jealousy.	
37th	Death of Aśoka.	

The central issues before the historical analyst are:

(1) Why was Aśoka silent on Nyagrodha and Moggaliputta Tissa (or, according to Sanskrit Buddhist sources, Samudra and Upagupta), and why do the Buddhist sources make no reference whatsoever to the Kalinga war and its emotional impact on Aśoka?

(2) Does this mutual exclusion minimize the reliability of either or both sources?

(3) Did the conversion to Buddhism precede or follow this war?

One of the earliest scholars to be curious about the impression which Aśoka has created to the effect that his spiritual progress was "his own doing throughout"[24] was T.W. Rhys Davids. His assessment of the evidence of Sri Lankan Pali sources was: "I am not prepared to say, though their evidence is so much later, there may not be some truth in their views." Thus implicitly assigning Aśoka's contact with the Saṅgha a date anterior to the Kalinga war, he concluded: "But it is so very likely that one factor at least in the king's change of heart may have been the exhortation or conversation of one or other of the Arahats, *that we may suppose both accounts to have been right.*" (Emphasis mine.)[25]

More specific was James M. Macphail. To him, the conversion of Aśoka preceded the Kalinga war. He argued as follows:

> It is not easy to understand why Aśoka, the head of a great military empire that had been acquired in no very remote time by conquest, should have been so deeply affected and conscience-stricken by his experience of what were in those days familiar horrors of war. *There must surely have been some preparation for so great a change.* Possibly the teaching of the followers of Gautama had impressed him more than he himself realized, and the experience of actual bloodshed on a large scale, merely

to gratify ambition and enrich the State, served to crystallize into convictions impressions that had been slowly forming in his mind. (Emphasis mine.)"

The issues listed above arise simply because Aśoka had not stated how and when he came into contact with Buddhism. The confusion among most scholars had arisen because RE XIII has been generally interpreted as an account of Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism." Such an interpretation accords with the popular concept of psychological change following from a telling occurrence in a person's life (e.g. the sight of the sick, the old, the dead and the ascetic, which turned the Buddha on his way to renunciation). A very careful scrutiny of this Edict in comparison with MRE I would show that it is the latter which describes his conversion to Buddhism rather than the former. What RE XIII recounts is Aśoka's intense emotional experience which prompted him to change his policy of *dig-vijaya* (i.e. imperialist expansion as enjoined as a major duty of a king according to the Hindu *dharmaśāstras*)[28] to *dharmavijaya* or conquest through righteousness. The purpose of this Edict was specific, to dissuade his sons and grandsons from resorting to conquest by arms: "that they should regard conquest through Dharma *(dharmavijaya)* as the true conquest. Such a conquest brings happiness to all concerned both in this world and in the next."

In Aśoka's own words, the effect of the Kalinga war on himself was as follows:

> Now that the country of the Kalingas has been conquered, the Beloved of the Gods is devoted to an intense practice of the duties relating to the Dharma, [*or,* according to other versions of the Edict, zealous discussion of Dharma], to a longing for Dharma and to the inculcation of Dharma among the people.

> This is due to the repentance of the Beloved of the Gods on having conquered the country of the Kalingas.

There is an interesting drafting point which may usefully be analyzed. The timing for Aśoka's involvement with Dharma is expressed in Prakrit as *'tato pacā adhunā ladhesu kāligesu'* (Shahbazgarhi text), or *'tato pacchā adhunā ladesha kāligyesu'* (Kalsi text). This special grammatical construction in Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit, called the locative absolute, is used to express not merely a sequence in time (i.e. when such a thing was done…) but more emphatically a "conditioning or accompanying circumstance"[29] (i.e. *now that* it has been done…). What the text with this syntactical form conveys is that the annexation of Kalinga was an obligation or even a pre-requisite which had to be fulfilled. Whether it was necessitated by royal duties as conceived at the time or by demands of national security, Aśoka had to do it. It was only after that that he could devote himself to the Dharma. Of course, the miseries which his war perpetrated convinced him how wrong the pursuit of armed conquest was.

Such an interpretation of the Edict on the strict analysis of Aśoka's choice of words and grammatical form would certainly take away much of the dramatic effect which popular interpretations would assign to the Kalinga war. But it confirms that the information on Aśoka's conversion — especially the date — as given in the Sri Lankan Pali sources could still be accurate.

5. Historical Reliability of Rock Edict XIII

The third question for which an answer is sought in this paper is: How consistent were Aśoka's statements in terms of time and place? This question is raised in relation to RE XIII. itself,

whose central theme is the conquest of Kalinga, the remorse and repentance it caused in Aśoka, and the consequent change in his military or foreign policy. So far, as many as eight versions (including a condensed Greek version) have been found in such far-flung places as Afghanistan (2 copies), Pakistan (2 copies), Andhra Pradesh, Gujerat, Uttar Pradesh (near Debra Dun), Mahārāshtra (near Bombay) — but not a single version in or near Kalinga itself. There must be a special reason for this.

This would be, on the face of it, rejected as an "argument from silence." But that is not so in this particular case.

The series of fourteen Rock Edicts (RE I–XIV) appears in exact sequence in identical words (with very minor modifications) in the eight sites mentioned above. There are two similar series of Rock Edicts in Jaugada and Dhauli in Orissa, that is, in ancient Kalinga. They differ from the rest in one major and most significant factor. The crucial Rock Edict XIII which expresses Aśoka's heartfelt repentance on the miseries he caused to the people of Kalinga is missing, along with Rock Edicts XI and XII. If these three Edicts were simply dropped from the series, it could have been explained as an omission by the scribes. What strikes our attention is that in their place two other Edicts have been inserted which are specifically addressed to the Mahāmātras stationed at Samāpā and Tosalī.

There is of course, the explanation which Aśoka had himself given in RE XIV. By way of explaining the possible variations in text and contents, he says:

> In the series of records, there are texts written in a concise form or in a medium form, or in an elaborate form. And *all the items of the series have not been put together in all places.* For my dominions are wide, and much has been written, and I shall certainly cause still more to be written.

> *There are some topics which have been repeated over and over again owing to their sweetness, so that people may act accordingly.* There may be some topics which have been written incompletely either *as the particular place of a record was considered unsuitable for them* or as a special reason for abridgment was believed to exist, and also owing to a fault of the scribe. (Emphasis mine.)

According to this, the only reason for omitting RE XIII could have been that Aśoka considered its contents unsuitable for the people of Kalinga. Then arises the question: Why? Was there any reason why Aśoka had to keep away from his Kalingan subjects the fact that he repented the havoc he created there or that it was that war which changed his entire imperialist policy?

There is no doubt room for a sneaking suspicion that there is something very strange if Aśoka considered the contents of RE XIII to be unsuitable for his subjects in Kalinga at either Jaugada or Dhauli. What exactly is it that he did not want them to know? The number of casualties? His repentance? Or the "softening" of his militaristic policy?

These are about the only sensitive matters which could have influenced his decision unless, of course, one can, even most reluctantly, conceive of an extreme case of inexactitude on the part of Aśoka and conclude that the whole episode on the Kalinga war and its consequences was more imaginary than real. It would then be only an attractive story, presented in vivid colour, to impress those who were far removed from the scene both by distance and time and hence unable to verify its truth or accuracy. That would be to say that Aśoka could not possibly tell the Kalingas of a war that did not take place or whose results and extent of damage were different. In spite of the richness of details and the general historical reliability of the Buddhist literary sources in both Pali and Sanskrit, they

are altogether silent on a Kalinga episode. As far as they are concerned, such a war had not been responsible for the conversion of Aśoka the Wicked to Aśoka the Righteous.

To be more certain, one should take a closer look at the two texts which replaced RE XI–XIII in Kalinga. The text of RE XV is as follows:

> Thus saith the Beloved of the Gods:
>
> The following royal order has to be addressed to the *Mahāmatras stationed at Samāpā:*
>
> As regards whatever good I notice, I desire that I may carry it out by deeds and accomplish it by proper means. And I consider the following to be the principal means to this end, viz., to impart instruction to you.
>
> *All men are my children.* Just as, in regard to my own children, I desire that they may be provided by me with all kinds of welfare and happiness in this world and in the next, the same I desire in respect of all men.
>
> *The following question may occur to the people of the unconquered territories lying beyond the border of my dominions:* "What is the king's desire in respect of us?" The following alone is my wish which should be realized by *the peoples living on the borders,* viz., that the king desires that they should be unworried on his account, that they should have confidence in him, and that they should expect of him only happiness and no misery. The following also should be realized by them, viz., that the king will forgive them in respect of any offence that is pardonable. My desire is that they should practise the duties associated with Dharma for my sake and that they should attain happiness in this world as well as in the next.
>
> Now, I instruct you for the following purpose, *viz., that I may free myself from the debt I owe to the people inhabiting the lands beyond the borders of my dominions* by having instructed you and informed you of my will as well as my unshakeable resolution and vow.

Therefore, acting accordingly, you should perform your duties. You should also inspire *the people of the bordering lands with confidence in me,* so that they might realize that the king is to them even as their father, that he sympathizes with them even as he sympathizes with his own self, and that they are to the king even as his own children.

Having instructed you and informed you of my will as well as my unshakeable resolution and vow, *I feel that my appeal to you in this respect will be known to the people of the whole country. Indeed you are capable of inspiring them with confidence in myself* and securing their welfare and happiness in this world and in the next. And, by so doing, you will attain heaven and discharge the debt you owe to me.

So this record has been written here on stone for the following purpose, viz., that the Mahāmātras should strive to do their duty at all times in order *to inspire the people living on the borders of my dominions with confidence in me and to induce them to practise the duties associated with Dharma:*

Therefore all of you should listen to this record read out on every Chāturmasi day as well as on the day of the Tishya constellation. You may also listen to it even on any other occasion as it presents itself. And, by so doing, you will be able to accomplish your duties. (Emphasis mine.)

And here is RE XVI:

The Mahāmātras of Tosalī, who are the judicial officers of the city, have to be addressed in the following words of the Beloved of the Gods:

As regards whatever good I notice, I desire that I may carry it out by deeds and accomplish it by proper means, and I consider the following to be the principal means to this end, viz., to impart instruction to you. For you are placed by me over many thousands of beings with the object that *I may gain the affection of all men.*

All men are my children. Just as, in regard to my own children, I desire that they may be provided with all kinds of welfare and happiness in this world and in the next, the same I desire also in regard to all men. But you do not understand how far my intention goes in this respect. A few amongst you may understand it; but even such of you understand it partly and not fully. Howsoever well-placed you may be, you have to pay attention to this matter.

In the administration of justice, it sometimes happens that some persons suffer imprisonment or harsh treatment. In such cases, a person may accidentally obtain an order cancelling his imprisonment, while many other persons in the same condition continue to suffer for a long time. In such a circumstance, you should so desire as to deal with all of them impartially.

But an officer fails to act impartially owing to the following dispositions, viz., jealousy, anger, cruelty, hastiness, want of perseverance, laziness and fatigue. Therefore, you should desire that these dispositions may not be yours. And the root of the complete success of an officer lies in the absence of anger and avoidance of hastiness. In the matter of administration of justice, an officer does not get up for work if he is fatigued but he has to move, to walk and to advance. Whoever amongst you pays attention to this should tell other officers: "Pay attention to nothing except the duties assigned to you by the king. Such and such are the instructions of the Beloved of the Gods." The observance of this duty will produce great results for you; but its non-observance will produce great harm. For, if you fail to observe this, there will be for you neither the attainment of heaven nor the attainment of the king's favour. Because indifferent observance of this duty on your part cannot make me excessively energetic in favouring you. If, however, you observe this duty, you will attain heaven and also discharge the debt you owe to me, your master.

And all of you should listen to this record read out on the day of the Tishya constellation. Some of you may listen to it also on

other suitable occasions on any day between two days of Tishya. In case you do this, you will be able to accomplish your duty.

This record has been written here for the following purpose, viz., *that the judicial officers of the city may strive to do their duty at all times and that the people within their charge suffer neither from unnecessary imprisonment nor from unnecessary harassment.*

Hence I shall cause my Mahāmātras, who will be neither harsh nor fierce in temperament, but will be gentle in action, to set out on tours of inspection, every five years, for the following purpose, viz., to ascertain if the judicial officers have realized this object of mine and are acting according to my instructions.

Similarly, from Ujjayinī also, the Prince Viceroy will send officers of the same class every year for the same purpose and will not allow three years to pass without such a mission being sent out on tour. In the same way, officers will be deputed from Takshaśilā also. When these Mahāmātras will set out on tours of inspection every year, then without neglecting their normal duties, they will have to ascertain the following, viz., if the local judicial officers are acting according to the king's instructions. (Emphasis mine.)

Both edicts ring an unmistakable tone of pacification; in RE XV, through persuasion and propaganda that Aśoka is resolutely intent on the welfare of the people, and in RE XVI, through impartiality in judicial administration. The people who are to be so pacified or won over are explicitly called *"antānam avijitānam"* (as paraphrased by Sircar, "the people of the unconquered territories lying beyond the borders of my dominions").

The location of the two inscriptions in the maritime regions of eastern Kalinga presents a further problem as to where these unconquered border areas could be. It is reasonable to assume that Samāpā and Tosalī were within Aśoka's dominions as his Mahāmātras could not have operated from them otherwise. In that case it was the littoral of Kalinga that was

within his dominions. The frontier region, whose people the Emperor wanted to win over, had therefore to be located in western Kalinga (i.e. away from the sea). What it implies is that Aśoka had not annexed the whole of Kalinga to his empire and the area he calls "unconquered *(avijita)*" frontiers was actually the major part of Kalinga. In such a situation, the opening words of RE XIII, namely, "the country of the Kalingas was conquered by King Priyadarśī" — which is repeated in modified form twice more in the text — would have been challenged in Kalinga.

Even if one explains thus the omission of RE XIII in the two Kalinga sites, one is faced with a further difficulty in trying to understand why RE XI and RE XII are also excluded from the series in these sites. RE XI is a straightforward declaration of the principles of moral conduct that Aśoka wanted to propagate in his dominions. But the emphasis is on the gift of Dharma (i.e. propagation of Dharma through precept and example). It runs as follows:

> Thus saith King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods:
>
> *There is no such gift as the gift of Dharma*, no such act of dividing as the separation of Dharma from what is not Dharma, and no such kinship as kinship through Dharma. These comprise the following, viz., proper courtesy to slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, liberality to friends, acquaintances and relatives as well as to the Brāhmaṇas and śramaṇas, and abstention from the slaughter of living beings.
>
> In respect of this, whether one is a person's father, or son, or brother, or master, or friend, or acquaintance, one ought to say to him: "This is meritorious. This ought to be done." If he acts in this manner, happiness in this world is attained by him and endless merit is produced for him in the next world by the said *gift of Dharma*." (Emphasis mine.)

RE XII is Aśoka's *Magna Carta* on religious tolerance. It has remained unmatched as a most enlightened statement on interreligious amity. The full text is as follows:

> King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods, honours men of all religious communities with gifts and with honours of various kinds, irrespective of whether they are ascetics or householders. But the Beloved of the Gods does not value either the offering of gifts or the honouring of people so highly as the following, viz., that *there should be a growth of the essentials of Dharma among men of all sects.*
>
> And the growth of the essentials of Dharma is possible in many ways. *But its root lies in restraint in regard to speech, which means that there should be no extolment of one's own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions and that it should be moderate in every case even on appropriate occasions. On the contrary, other sects should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions.*
>
> If a person acts in this way, he not only promotes his own sect but also benefits other sects. But if *a person acts otherwise, he not only injures his own sect and disparages other sects with a view to glorifying his sect owing merely to his attachment to it, he injures his own sect very severely by acting in that way. Therefore, restraint in regard to speech is commendable, because people should learn and respect the fundamentals of one another's Dharma.*
>
> This indeed is the desire of the Beloved of the Gods, that *persons of all sects become well informed about the doctrines of different religions and acquire pure knowledge.* And those who are attached to their respective sects should be informed as follows: "The Beloved of the Gods does not value either the offering of gifts or the honouring of people so highly as the following, viz., that there should be a growth of the essentials of Dharma among men of all sects."
>
> Indeed many of my officers are engaged for the realization of the said end, such as the Mahāmātras in charge of the affairs relating to Dharma, the Mahāmātras who are superin-

tendents of matters relating to the ladies of the royal household, the officers in charge of my cattle and pasture lands, and other classes of officials. *And the results of their activities, as expected by me, is the promotion of each one's sect and the glorification of Dharma.* (Emphasis mine.)

Assuming that the scribes did not make a mistake, what could reasonably explain their deletion?

An in-depth analysis of the two sets of edicts (namely, RE XI–XIII absent in the Kalinga series and RE XV and XVI which replace them there) raises the question whether the propagation of Dharma was not a secondary priority in Kalinga where the real priority was the pacification of the unconquered frontier people through propaganda on the Emperor's virtues on the one hand, and the impartial administration of justice on the other. It may also be conjectured that there were no Dharma-Mahāmātras at Samāpā and Tosalī[30] who could be entrusted with the implementation of RE XI and XII. It is also possible, as my more recent study of Aśokan edicts shows, that what is now labelled RE XI, XII and XIII were actually a single edict and hence the omission as a whole in Kalinga.[31] The doubt, however, is raised that Kalinga was really not annexed to his dominions and administered as an integral part of the empire.

Thus the lithic evidence from Kalinga only deepens the mystery of the famous war which, in Aśoka's own words, was the turning point not only in his life but in his attitude to war and empire building.

6. Aśoka's Role in the Propagation of Buddhism in his Empire

The same type of discrepancy which exists between Aśoka's own inscriptions and the Buddhist tradition relating to his con-

version to Buddhism persists as regards his role in the propagation of Buddhism. According to Buddhist literary sources, Aśoka had been the ideal Buddhist ruler extending his generous and devout patronage to Buddhism in every possible way. Specifically mentioned is his initiative in both internal and foreign missionary endeavours after the Third Buddhist Council.

As already stated earlier, the accuracy of especially the Sri Lankan Pali sources as regards information on these missions has been established beyond doubt on account of archaeological corroboration.[32] But the nagging question which every Aśokan scholar had to deal with has been why the inscriptions of Aśoka are themselves less specific.

One of the more recent Aśokan scholars, Romila Thapar,[33] makes the following observation:

> More recent analyses suggest, however, that although he was personally a Buddhist, as his edicts addressed to the Buddhist Saṅgha (Order) attest, the majority of his edicts in which he attempted to define *dhamma* do not suggest that he was merely preaching Buddhism…. In his edicts Aśoka defines the main principles of *dhamma* as non-violence, tolerance of all sects and opinions, obedience to parents, respect to brahmins and other religious teachers and priests, liberality toward friends, humane treatment of servants and generosity towards all. It suggests a general ethic of behaviour to which no religious or social group could object. It also could act as a focus of loyalty to weld together the diverse strands that made up the empire. Interestingly, the Greek versions of these edicts translate *dhamma* as *eusebeia* (piety) and no mention is made anywhere of the teachings of the Buddha, as would be expected if Aśoka had been propagating Buddhism.'

Thapar has made two statements which need clarification: (i) that Aśoka was personally a Buddhist is attested to in his

edicts addressed to the Saṅgha; and (ii) no mention is made *anywhere* of the teachings of the Buddha. As shown earlier, Aśoka did express his affiliation to Buddhism in several lithic records and not all of them are addressed to the Saṅgha. Certainly, MRE I which is found in thirteen locations is not an edict addressed only to the Saṅgha. So is RE VII, which refers to his pilgrimage to the sacred Bodhi Tree. If there is an impression created in some minds as a result of statements like Thapar's that Aśoka did not broadcast his Buddhist affiliations far and wide, his lithic records would not permit such an impression to be sustained.

The other statement that the teachings of the Buddha are not mentioned *anywhere* stands refuted by MRE III at Bairat (Bhābru) where seven identifiable discourses of the Buddha have been presented by Aśoka to his co-religionists — the religious and the lay — as his recommended anthology of readings from the Buddhist Canon. Equally significant are word-perfect direct quotations from the Tripiṭaka which are found in the edicts. Barua has marshalled together enough evidence in the form of no less than 270 parallels which supports his conclusion that "none was, perhaps, more steeped in the knowledge of the *Buddhavacana* than Aśoka, that none drank deeper at that fountain of inspiration."[35] What Thapar had in mind, quite probably, was that Aśoka makes no reference to the fundamental Buddhist doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths, the three signata *(anicca-dukkha-anattā),* the twelve-point dependent causation *(paṭicca samuppāda),* or even Nirvāna.

The anthology of Buddhist texts which Aśoka identified serves as an index to what aspect of Buddhism had attracted his attention. What we see in the edicts is nothing more than a paraphrased and condensed version of the ethical teachings of

these texts. Twice in MRE III he calls these suttas "the texts of the Dharma" and "the true Dharma." It is true that the teachings of the Buddha, when shorn of the characteristic fundamental doctrines, would be in many ways similar to the contemporary religious systems of eastern India such as Jainism. Thus Aśoka's Dharma could resemble any of these systems and, perhaps, Aśoka had this eclectic element as one of the guiding principles in the choice of values to be inculcated. But the religious system from which Aśoka's Dharma is furthest removed is Brahmanism or Hinduism founded on the authority of the Vedas. None of the phases of pantheism, kathenotheism or monism in the development of Hindu thought is reflected in the edicts. Nor do any of the known gods of Hinduism figure by name anywhere in the hitherto discovered inscriptions.

On the contrary, what they speak very lightly of are the rites and rituals which are central to Hinduism and which the *dharmaśāstras* prescribe as obligatory sacraments *(saṃskāra)*. Consider, for example, RE IX:

> Thus saith King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods.
>
> People perform various auspicious ceremonies on the occasions of illness, the weddings of sons, the weddings of daughters, the birth of children and the setting out on journeys. *On these and similar other occasions, people perform many auspicious ceremonies. And on such occasions, the womenfolk in particular perform many and diverse* ceremonies which are trivial and meaningless. (Emphasis mine.)

Specifically prohibited by Aśoka were animal sacrifices — RE I. Yet the brahmins were held in high regard and his injunction on showing reverence to religious persons always grouped Śramaṇas and Brāhmaṇas together.

One conclusion which emerges from all this internal

evidence of Aśoka's own lithic records is that the Dharma he taught was none other than the code of ethics of Buddhism as the Buddha himself preached it in such suttas as Sigālovāda, Dhammika, Vyagghapajja, Parābhava, etc., each of which is as devoid of references to characteristic Buddhist doctrines as Aśoka's inscriptions are. So when, as a minimum message, the Rajjukas and Prādeśikas were ordered to convey the following to his subjects, Aśoka was presenting the quintessence of practical Buddhism:

> Meritorious is obedience to mother and father. Meritorious is liberality to friends, acquaintances and relatives and to the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas. Meritorious is abstention from the slaughter of living beings. Meritorious is to spend little and store little (RE III).
>
> One should obey one's mother and father and likewise one's elders. One should be steadfast in one's kindness towards living beings. One should speak the truth. In this way, one should propound these attributes of Dharma. In the same way, the pupil should honour his teacher and this practice should be established by one in the proper manner among one's relations. This is an ancient rule and the principle is long standing. One should act in this way (MRE II).[36]
>
> Thus saith King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods:
>
> A person has an eye on his good deed only and says to himself: "This good deed have I done." Not in the least does he notice his sin *(pāpa),* saying to himself: "This sinful act have I perpetrated," or "This indeed is what is called sin." But this is certainly difficult to scrutinize. Nevertheless, one should verily look into the matter thus: "These passions surely lead to sin, such as violence, cruelty, anger, vanity and jealousy. Let me not ruin myself by reason of these very passions." One should seriously reflect on the following: "This one is for my good only in this world and the other one is for my good also in the next world" (PE III).

These teachings, in fact, are the very ones which are elaborated in the seven Buddhist texts he recommended in the Bairat (Bhābru) Edict.

Once again the Sri Lankan Pali sources provide further evidence on the kind of Buddhist teachings Aśoka must have underscored. The first sermon which each of the teams of Buddhist missionaries preached is recorded as follows:

Majjhantika in Kashmir and Gandhara: *Āsivisūpama Sutta — either* Āsīvisa Sutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, which is an allegory on evil forces a person has to be conscious of, or Āsīvisa Sutta of the Anguttara Nikāya, on anger.

Rakkhita in Vanavāsa: *Anamatagga Saṃyutta,* which concentrates on the evils of ignorance and craving.

Dharmarakkhita, the Greek, in Aparanta: *Aggikkhandhopama Sutta* (also preached by Mahinda in Sri Lanka), which emphasizes moral conduct.

Mahādhammarakkhita in Mahārāshtra: *Mahānāradakassapa Jātaka,* which upholds goodness, generosity and charity as opposed to hedonistic pleasures.

Mahārakkhita in the Greek country: *Kālakārāma Sutta,* on the Buddha's comprehension of the world without being subject to it.

Majjhima in Himālaya: *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta,* the first sermon outlining the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

Uttara in Suvaṇṇabhūmi: *Brahmajālā Sutta,* which analyses different philosophical speculations and underscores moral conduct.

Mahinda in Sri Lanka: *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta,* which stresses the life of a real devotee.

With the exception of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta,

all these sermons could be described as not highlighting characteristic Buddhist teachings, just like Aśoka's inscriptions. But none could deny that these suttas do constitute the teachings of the Buddha.

It is also evident that the foundation for the code of moral conduct which Aśoka expounded in his edicts and inscriptions is identical with that of popular Buddhism, that is, Buddhism as a popular mass religion founded on the principle of reward or retribution for action not only in this very life but also in the next.[37] Taught through a vast array of interesting narratives presented in the *Jātakas, Vimānavatthu, Petavatthu, Apadāna, Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka* in the Tripiṭaka itself, and elaborated in an extensive literature in all Buddhist countries, this form of popular Buddhism promoted happiness in the next birth — usually in one of the heavens — as the immediate goal of liberality and good conduct. This message has been conveyed in Buddhist circles not only through verbal communication, but more importantly through visual aid in sculpture and painting. RE V–IV underlines Aśoka's adoption of similar means for the propagation of Dhamma. He says:

> Abstention from slaughter of life, absence of cruelty to living creatures, seemly behaviour to relatives, seemly behaviour to the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas, obedience to mother and father, and obedience to the aged have increased now owing to the instruction in Dharma imparted by King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods, to such a degree as was not possible to achieve for many hundreds of years in the past *by means of showing to the people the representations of celestial cars and celestial elephants, masses of hell-fire as well as many other heavenly forms.* The practices of *Dharma of the above kind* as also of various other kinds have increased and King Priyadarśī Beloved of the Gods, will cause such practices of Dharma to increase still more. (Emphasis mine.)

If Aśoka was responsible for this innovation, as the edict suggests, the fact that the practice of illustrating happiness in heavens and suffering in hells has remained a significant aspect of Buddhist art would imply its original association with the propagation of Buddhism.

Taking all these clues into consideration, it is reasonable to conclude that Aśoka's claim that "every proclamation by beating of drums has become the proclamation of Dharma" applies to the propagation of popular Buddhism through both administrative mechanisms (which the edicts and inscriptions outline) and missionary operations (of which detailed and accurate records have been preserved by the Sri Lankan Saṅgha).

7. Foreign Missions of Aśoka

PI VII, found only on the Topra Pillar now in Delhi and dated in the 27th year from coronation, summarizes Aśoka's efforts for the promotion of the Dharma. In his own words, the following were the steps he had taken:

> This thought occurred to me: "I will cause proclamations of Dharma to be proclaimed and instruction in Dharma to be imparted. Hearing these, the people will conform to them, will be elevated and will progress considerably through the promotion of Dharma."
>
> *For this purpose have I caused proclamations on Dharma to be proclaimed and various kinds of instruction in Dharma have I ordered to be imparted, so that those officers of mine who are placed by me over many people will also preach and disseminate them.* And the Rajjukas are placed by me over many hundred thousands of beings and they have also been ordered: "Instruct the people who are devoted to Dharma in such and such a manner."
>
> Having this very matter in view, *I have set up pillars bearing*

records relating to Dharma, appointed Mahāmātras to deal with the affairs connected with Dharma, and issued proclamations on Dharma.

Those Dharma-Mahāmātras of mine are occupied with various kinds of activities which are beneficial both to ascetics and to householders. And they are occupied with all the religious sects. I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with the affairs of the Saṅgha. Likewise I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with the Brāhmaṇas and Ājīvakas. Similarly I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with the Nirgranthas. In the same way I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with various other religious sects. The different Mahāmātras are occupied not only with the communities referred to above, but also with the other sects not mentioned specifically.

My intention is that the noble deeds of Dharma and the practice of Dharma which consists of *compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness and goodness will thus be promoted among men.*

Whatever good deeds I have performed, those the people have imitated and to those they are conforming. Thereby they have progressed and will progress further in respect of obedience to mother and father, obedience to elders, courtesy to the aged and courtesy to the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas, to the poor and the distressed, and even to slaves and servants.

This progress of Dharma among men has been promoted by me only in two ways, viz., *by imposing restrictions* in accordance with the principles of Dharma and *by exhortation.* But of these two, the restrictions relating to Dharma are of little consequence. *By exhortation, however, Dharma has been promoted considerably.* The restrictions relating to Dharma are, indeed, such as have been enjoined by me, viz., that certain animals are exempt from slaughter, and also the numerous other restrictions relating to Dharma that I have imposed. The progress of Dharma among men has indeed been promoted by me considerably by exhortation in regard to the abstention from hurting any living being and abstention from killing any animal. (Emphasis mine.)

Conspicuous by its absence is any reference in this particular inscription to foreign missions. If Aśoka assigned high priority to dissemination of Dharma beyond his dominions, why was this fact left out from what appears to be a comprehensive record of his achievements? But three edicts record Aśoka's relations with territories outside his empire. RE II, which in the series RE I–IV is dated not earlier than twelve years after coronation, speaks of the social service measures that Aśoka undertook in the bordering territories:

> Everywhere in the dominions of King Priyadarśī the Beloved of the Gods, and *likewise in the bordering territories such as those of the Choḍas and Pāṇḍyas as well as of the Sātiyaputra and the Keralaputra as far south as Tāmraparṇi, and in the territories of the Yavana king Antiyoka and also the kings who are neighbours of the said Antiyoka* — everywhere King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods, has arranged for two kinds of medical treatment, viz., medical treatment for men and medical treatment for animals. And wherever there were no roots and fruits, they have been caused to be imported and planted. On the roads, wells have been caused to be dug and trees have been caused to be planted for the enjoyment of animals and men.

RE V, which is not dated but definitely written after the creation of the posts of Dharma-Mahāmātras thirteen years after coronation, speaks of the propagation of Dharma in territories of the western frontiers of Aśoka's empire:

> In the ages gone by, there were no officers called Dharma-Mahāmātras. So I created the posts of Dharma-Mahāmātras thirteen years after my coronation. These officers are occupied with all the religious sects for the establishment of Dharma and for the promotion of Dharma as well as for the welfare and happiness of those who are devoted to Dharma *even among the Yavanas, Kāmbojas and Gandhāras, the Rāshtrikapaitryānikas and*

> *the other peoples dwelling about the western borders of my dominions.* (Emphasis mine.)

It is in RE XIII that we have the most comprehensive account of Aśoka's Dharmavijaya, "conquest through Dharma" of foreign lands:

> So, what is conquest through Dharma is now considered to be the best conquest by the Beloved of the Gods. And such a conquest has been achieved by the Beloved of the Gods *not only here in his own dominions, but also in the territories bordering on his dominions, as faraway as at a distance of six hundred yojanas, where the Yavana king named Antiyoka* is *ruling and where beyond the kingdom of the said Antiyoka, four other kings named Turamāya, Antikini, Makā and Alikasundara are also ruling, and towards the south where the Choḷas and Pāṇḍyans are living, as far as Tāmraparṇi.* Likewise here in the dominions of His Majesty, the Beloved of the Gods — in *the countries of the Yavanas and Kāmbojas of the Nābhakas and Nābhapanktis of the Bhoja-paitryānikas and of the Andhras and Paulindas* — everywhere people are conforming to the instruction in Dharma imparted by the Beloved of the Gods.
>
> *Even where the envoys of the Beloved of the Gods have not penetrated,* there too men have heard of the practices of Dharma and the ordinances issued and the instruction in Dharma imparted by the Beloved of the Gods, and are conforming to Dharma and will continue to conform to it. (Emphasis mine.)

RE XIII is also not dated. As the appointment of Dharma-Mahāmātras took place thirteen years after coronation, both RE V and RE XIII are to be dated at least several years after that, because they report substantial progress made by this new service.[38]

RE XIII is of very great significance from the point of view of chronology. It refers to five Greek kings who were Aśoka's contemporaries. They have been identified and dated with a fair degree of accuracy as follows:

Antiyoka (also mentioned in RE II): Antiochus II Theos of the Seleucid dynasty in Syria and West Asia (i.e. the immediate western neighbour of Aśoka's empire): 261–246 B.C.

Turamāya (Tulamaya): Ptolemy II Philadelphus in Egypt: 285–247 B.C.

Antikini (Antekina): Antigonus Gonatas in Macedonia: 277–239 B.C.

Makā (Magā): Magas of Cyrene in North Africa: 282–258 B.C.

Alikasundara: Alexander of Epirus: 272–255 B.C.[39]

These dates lead us to the conclusion that the foreign Dharmavijaya of Aśoka should have commenced at least by 258 B.C., which is the last year of the reign of Magas of Cyrene. What makes this date particularly significant is that it enables the reign of Aśoka to be more reliably dated. Calculating from different starting points such as the date of the Buddha's demise, Alexander's invasion and Chandragupta's relations with Seleucus Nicator, the date for Aśoka's coronation has been postulated by Aśokan scholars as 265–264 B.C., 273–272 B.C., or 270–269 B.C. How the year 258 B.C. relates to these dates is seen from Table II.

Table II

Proferred date for Aśoka's coronation	*Latest possible date for foreign missions of Aśoka*	*Years from Aśoka's coronation*
265–264 B.C.	258 B.C.	6th or 7th
273–272 B.C.	258 B.C.	14th or 15th
270–269 B.C.	258 B.C.	11th or 12th

From Aśoka's own statements in the edicts and inscriptions about his progressive involvement with Buddhism, as discussed

earlier, the creation of the new cadre of Dharma-Mahāmātras thirteen years after the coronation is, in every likelihood, the starting point of his Dharmavijaya. Thus a mission to Magas could most reasonably be fixed between 13 and 15 years after coronation. This would of course, favour 273–272 B.C. as the most acceptable date proferred for Aśoka's coronation. But several major issues relating to Aśoka's foreign missions remain to be solved. A number of specially convincing synchronizations in Sri Lankan history favours 270–269 B.C. This would mean that Aśoka's programme of disseminating the Dhamma began around the tenth year after coronation.[40]

The most fundamental of such issues relates to whether Aśoka ever sent Buddhist missionaries to the Greek territories specified in RE XIII. It was Rhys Davids who, in 1902, expressed his initial doubts in the following terms:

> It is difficult to say how much of it is mere royal rodomontade. It is quite likely that the Greek kings are only thrown in by way of makeweight as it were and that no emissaries had been actually sent there at all. Even had they been sent, there is little reason to believe that Greek self-complacency would have been much disturbed. Aśoka's estimate of the results obtained is better evidence of his own vanity than it is of Greek docility. We may imagine the Greek amusement at the absurd idea of a "barbarian" teaching them their duty; but we can scarcely imagine them discarding their gods and their superstitions at the bidding of an alien king."

He proceeded to analyze the data in the Sri Lankan chronicles and elaborated his view further as follows:

> The Chronicles thus not only confirm but also supplement Aśoka's information about the missions. And when we find that *they ascribe the sending out of the missionaries, not to Aśoka, but to the leaders of the Order,* and that *they make no mention of any such*

missions to Greek kingdoms in the distant West, it is at least probable that the view they take is more accurate, in these respects, than the official proclamation. (Emphasis mine.)[42]

Before determining the comparative accuracy as regards the record presented by Aśoka on the one hand, and the Sri Lankan Pali sources[43] on the other, it is necessary to analyze Aśoka's statements in greater depth. In RE II only King Antiochus is mentioned by name. But Aśoka claims that the arrangements made for the provision of medical treatment for human beings and animals extended to the territories of "also the kings who are neighbours of the said Antiyoka." RE XIII describes the extent of Aśoka's Dharmavijaya in two dimensions: geographically and ethnically. *Geographically,* his conquest through Dharma is said to have extended to dominions as far away as *six hundred yojanas.* It is here that the five Greek kings are mentioned by name. This is the area covered by his emissaries, for he says further that, even where his envoys had not penetrated, people have heard of his instructions and practices and were conforming to them. *Ethnically,* his conquest through Dharma is shown as encompassing non-indigenous or minority communities within his dominions such as the Yavanas and Kāmbojas, Nābhakas and Nābhapanktis, Bhoja-paitryānikas, Andhras and Paulindas.

The figure six hundred is, indeed, significant. Taking a yojana to be about seven miles, this turns out to be the exact distance from Pāṭaliputra to Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene as the crow flies. All the countries which the edict mentions — including Sri Lanka in the South — fall within a radius of 4,000 miles from Aśoka's capital. This precision in distance, which is verifiable, shows at least that contact with these distant lands was based on actual travel. With the contemporaneity of the

five Greek kings among themselves and with Aśoka established by reliable evidence from Greek sources, Aśoka's claim to have sent envoys to them can hardly be doubted. A more significant proof comes from the fact that the edicts bearing this information were found in places like Kandahar in Afghanistan and Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi in Pakistan in areas abutting Greek territories and inhabited by Greeks. In fact, the adaptation of RE XIII which was found as far west as Kandahar was in Greek.

Rhys Davids is correct when he says that the Sri Lanka Pali sources ascribe the sending of missions to the initiative of Moggaliputta Tissa, the 72-year-old president of the Third Buddhist Council. He may also be correct in his observation that these sources do not mention any missions to the "Greek kingdoms in the distant West." The Chronicles do refer to a mission to Greek territories and, quite interestingly, the missionary sent to Aparantaka — Dhammarakkhita by name — is consistently described as a Yona or Greek.[44] The mission to the country of Yona was led by Mahārakkhita[45] and the first sermon he preached was the Kālakārāma Sutta.[46] Only one mission to a single Greek country is so mentioned and the most likely interpretation is that it was to the adjoining Greek territory of Antiochus II Theos, whose name occurs both in RE II and RE XIII.[47] Here arises a very important chronological problem. The Sri Lankan Pali sources place the Third Buddhist Council seventeen years after Aśoka's coronation and hence the missions have to be dated at least eighteen years after the coronation. If so, the date usually assigned to RE XIII (i.e. 14–15 years after coronation) would not be acceptable. Either this edict must be regarded as at least four or five years later or some other explanation has to be found.

Here again, the Sri Lankan Pali sources provide a clue. They speak of an exchange of missions with Sri Lanka prior to that of Mahinda. This mission of lay envoys is described in the *Mahāvaṃsa* as follows:

> The lord of men (i.e. Aśoka) sent envoys with the *gift of the true doctrine,* saying: "I have taken refuge in the Buddha, his doctrine and his Order, I have declared myself a lay disciple in the religion of the Sakya son; seek then even thou (i.e. Devānampiya Tissa), O best of men, converting thy mind with believing heart, refuge in these best of gems."[48]

The Chronicles also give a list of the gifts which Aśoka sent to the Sri Lankan king with this message; and this includes "yellow and emblic myrobalans and precious ambrosial healing herbs."[49] It is quite possible that it is this type of mission that Aśoka described in RE II with its special emphasis on the exportation and planting of medicinal plants in the countries mentioned in it. Sri Lanka is one of these countries. It is equally possible that RE XIII refers to similar envoys of Dharma, sent by Aśoka, on his own initiative, to spread the code of moral principles as he had conceived. If so, they could have preceded the missionary efforts which Moggaliputta Tissa put into operation after the Third Council. In this context, an analysis of the Sri Lankan Pali sources by Y. Dhammavisuddhi on Mahinda's mission to Sri Lanka shows that it was prearranged as regards both timing and venue by means of exchange of envoys.[50]

Viewed from such a standpoint, there is no question of comparative accuracy as regards the records of the Emperor and those of the Saṅgha. They in all probability speak of two different kinds of missions. Aśoka has claimed no credit (as far as the hitherto known lithic sources are concerned) for the missions fielded by Moggaliputta Tissa. But the expressions of

gratitude, amounting at times to sheer adulation, by the Buddhist literary sources prove that the efforts of the Saṅgha would have been difficult, if not impossible, without the Emperor's patronage and support. It appears reasonable, therefore, to conclude that Aśoka's own missions of official envoys (i.e. Dharma-Mahāmātras) could have gone as far as Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene, while the Saṅgha sent only one mission to the adjoining territory of Antiochus II Theos. It is quite possible that Aśoka's exploratory missions further West revealed the kind of Greek self-complacency that Rhys Davids spoke of and hence no missions were sent there eventually.

8. Conclusions

In attempting to answer the four questions we set ourselves at the beginning of this analysis, we have not only found some answers but also uncovered new issues. This is to be expected when we deal with a topic regarding which the diversity of the sources of information is as complex as the socio-cultural background, scholarly training, and underlying motives, biases and prejudices of the interpreters of such information.

As regards the four questions, our conclusions could be summarized as follows:

(1) It was undoubtedly Buddhism which Aśoka embraced as his personal religion. He did acquire an in-depth grasp of the doctrines, including its Canonical sources, as a result of his close association with the Saṅgha. There is no evidence that he ever became a Buddhist monk himself. On his own admission, his interest in Buddhism had grown gradually over a period of two years and it was only in the third that it became really enthusiastic. There is no discrepancy between the Buddhist tradition which names Nyagrodha or Samudra as the

monk responsible for his conversion and Aśoka's inscriptions which simply refer to the Saṅgha rather than to any individual monk. As regards Moggaliputta Tissa, the central figure in the Buddhist activities of Aśoka, the inscription *"Sappurisasa Mogalīputasa"* on a relic casket from Tope No. 2 of the Sānchi group establishes his historicity as well as his importance in the Saṅgha. As regards Upagupta to whom a comparative role is assigned in Sanskrit sources, no corresponding archaeological evidence has yet been found.

(2) Aśoka was already a Buddhist by conversion before his military operations to conquer Kalinga. If the futility of war was convincingly brought to Aśoka's attention by this war, the most likely reason was that the war itself was inconclusive. He had conquered only the coastal strip of Kalinga leaving the bulk of the territory outside his dominions with angry people who had to be placated and pacified. The image of an emperor eschewing war after victory because of remorse and repentance — which most of the popular writers on Aśoka liked to portray with enthusiasm — is, unfortunately, not borne out by the evidence. The Buddhist records make no mention of a Kalinga war because Aśoka's conversion was anterior to it and its impact on his faith in Buddhism, if any, was incidental. But for Aśoka, the conviction that all the havoc he created was futile had been a turning point in his imperialistic policy. He abandoned the traditional duty of an Indian monarch to engage in *digvijaya* (military conquest), and substituted in its place his own form of Dharmavijaya, which he justified by affirming that the conqueror and the conquered were both happy when the conquest was through Dharma.

(3) Aśoka was a discerning propagandist who drafted his messages to suit their recipients. What appear *prima facie* to

be inconsistencies begin to make sense when his own explanation in RE XIV is taken into consideration. Significantly, the variations in text according to the provenance of a particular edict or inscription reveal that each message was receiver-oriented. The same message in Greek and Aramaic was more tersely and explicitly worded than when his own Indian subjects were addressed.

In areas around the principal Buddhist centres, where Buddhism had taken firm root and hence was better known, he would talk of the Buddha and the Saṅgha and refer to texts from the Buddhist Canon. Here he would even call himself by the name Aśoka,[51] which apparently was more popular as the Emperor's appellation in Buddhist circles. Elsewhere, he spoke of only the Dharma as he conceived it and referred to himself formally as Priyadarśī, the Beloved of the Gods.

His silence on the Kalinga war in his lithic records in Kalinga calls for an explanation because the only obvious one is not entirely consistent with Aśoka's character. As to inconsistencies between the series of Rock Edicts and the series of Pillar Edicts, the reason lies in the objectives for which each was drafted. The sixteen Rock Edicts (including the two in Kalinga) had been prepared to provide exhortation to the people and instructions to officers. The seven Pillar Inscriptions — drafted 26 and 27 years after coronation (that is, at least 10–12 years after the Rock Edicts) — turn out to be more autobiographical or historical.

There are, no doubt, very significant omissions as we had highlighted in this paper. But there exists the possibility that new inscriptions may come to light any time in the future. It is only prudent to keep an open mind, considering how most of the conclusions of Rhys Davids, Vincent A. Smith and MacPhial

had to be altered in the light of new discoveries.

(4) Aśoka did play a major role in the propagation of Buddhism both within and outside his empire. He used the state machinery of Rajjukas and Mahāmātras — adding a new specialized cadre of Dharma-Mahāmātras — to disseminate a universal code of simple everyday ethics culled out by himself from his favourite Buddhist texts (texts which he recommended to his co-religionists, both clergy and laity). He replaced the call of drums for military services with that for Dharma. The propagation of his code of ethics was viewed by him as a conquest through Dharma.

He commenced the teaching of the Dharma ten years after the coronation, according to his Greek/Aramaic inscription. He began inscribing his messages on rocks twelve years after coronation and appointed Dharma-Mahāmātras thirteen years after coronation. He issued Pillar Edicts twenty-six and twenty-seven years after coronation.

The dissemination of Buddhism proper with all its doctrinal and practical complexities was an initiative of the Saṅgha. Aśoka's role in this endeavour had been to extend his patronage and support. His major contribution appears to have been in the form of exploratory missions to prepare the receptivity of host countries for missions by monks. As the Sri Lankan Pali sources show, he continued to support the missionary activities in host countries, exposing them in the process to the technical and aesthetic achievements of the Mauryan Civilization.

Out of our analysis also arises a further conclusion as regards the reliability of the various sources on Aśoka. The least reliable are the records of the Chinese travellers, Fa Hien and Hiuen Tsang, because they were based on what they heard during their travels. The former associates Aśoka's conversion anach-

ronistically with a brahmin exponent of Mahāyāna Buddhism by the name of Rādhāsvāmi. Hiuen Tsang is wrong on at least three major points: he dates Aśoka a hundred years after the Buddha, confusing him with Kālāśoka of the Second Buddhist Council fame; Aśoka is introduced as a great-grandson of King Bimbisāra of Magadha and this is genealogically unfounded; and Mahinda is said to be a brother and not a son of Aśoka. Though more reliable as regards the central events, the Sanskrit Buddhist sources, *Divyāvadāna* as well as *Aśokāvadāna* (Chinese version A-yü-wang-chuan translated from Sanskrit in 506 B.C. by Saṅghabhadra), are faulty as regards details and poetic extravagance has resulted in the masking of the facts. It appears essential that the validity of the Sanskrit Buddhist sources is subjected to a detailed scrutiny.[52]

What proved to be particularly gratifying is how the Sri Lankan Pali sources acquit themselves with remarkable credit. Once the chaff of faith-based accounts of miracles and past lives is removed, the kernel of historical fact, which remains, is not only substantial and consistent but also provides a key to the interpretation of Aśoka's edicts and inscriptions. The Sri Lankan Pali sources complement Aśoka's lithic records and, where they appear to be contradictory, the basic facts themselves need to be reviewed with care. This is what was attempted in this paper as regards the discrepancies between these two sources concerning Aśoka and his connection with Buddhism. The most significant finding of this analysis is that Aśoka's Dharmavijaya as described in RE XIII and the Buddhist missions to foreign lands as fielded by Moggaliputta Tissa — of course with Aśoka's patronage — may be two separate operations different in nature and objectives and also in timing.

Notes

1. H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (London, 1920). In his later work, *A Short History of the World* (London, 1922), he devoted a chapter (xxix) to King Aśoka. In it he said: "He invaded Kalinga, a country on the east coast of Madras, he was successful in his military operations and — alone among conquerors — he was so disgusted by the cruelty and horror of war that he renounces it. He would have no more of it. He adopted the peaceful doctrines of Buddhism and declared that henceforth the conquests should be conquests by religion…. Missionaries went from Aśoka to Kashmir, to Persia, to Ceylon and Alexandria. Such was Aśoka, greatest of kings. He was far in advance of his age." (Pelican Books Special Edition, 1946; pp. 94–95.)
2. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th. ed. (1977), Vol. 17, p. 135.
3. In versions other than the one at Shahbazgarhi the corresponding expression reads as "zealous discussion of Dharma."
4. This sentence appears differently in different versions. The Kalsi text reads "Excepting the country of the Yavanas, there is no country where Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas do not exist and there is no place in any country where men are not indeed sincerely devoted to one sect or another."
5. Right through this paper, I have chosen to use the somewhat free and annotated translation of Aśokan lithic records by D.C. Sircar in his *Inscriptions of Aśoka*,

3rd ed. rev. (New Delhi: Government of India, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1975). On the assumption that most readers of this paper will not have ready access to texts or translations of Aśoka's inscriptions and edicts, extensive quotations are reproduced as found appropriate. Whenever required, comparisons are made with the original texts of edicts and inscriptions as presented by D.C. Sircar with Sanskritized versions in his *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization,* Vol. I (University of Calcutta, 1942), as well as with the texts of edicts in Nalinaksha Dutt and Krishna Datta Bajpai, *Development of Buddhism in Uttar Pradesh* (Lucknow: Government of Uttar Pradesh Publications Bureau, 1956).

6. This extract is from a fragmentary inscription in Greek presenting a condensed adaptation of RE XII and RE XIII. It was found at Kandahar in 1963.

7. Apart from such pioneers as Prinsep, Cunningham, Bühler, Senart and Hultzch and Bloch, whose contribution was mainly in exploring or deciphering and interpreting the archaeological and epigraphical data on Aśoka, many scholars have produced monographs. The following are particularly helpful in assessing the development of Aśokan studies: Vincent A. Smith, *Aśoka,* 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1920); Jean Przyluski, *La Legende l'Empereur Aśoka* (Paris, 1923); James M. Macphail, *Aśoka,* rev. ed., The Heritage of India Series (Calcutta: YMCA, 1951); D.R. Bhandarkar, *Aśoka,* 3rd ed. (Calcutta, 1955); Radha Kumud Mookerjee, *Aśoka,* 3rd ed. (Delhi, 1955); Amulyachandra Sen, *Aśoka's Edicts* (Delhi, 1956); and Romila

Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi, 1961). The most comprehensive of the monographs on Aśoka is Beni Madhab Barua's *Aśoka and His Inscriptions,* Pts. I and II, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: New Age Publishers, 1955).

8. The Sri Lankan Pali sources consist of the *Dīpavaṃsa* (Dpv.) and the *Mahāvaṃsa* (Mhv.), the introduction to *Samantapāsādikā* (Smp.) by Buddhaghosa, and *Mahāvaṃsa-Tīkā,* all of which have been drawn heavily from the Sinhala commentaries which became extinct after their translation and adaptation in Pali by Buddhaghosa and others. It had been available for reference in circa 1000 A.C. to the author of the *Mahāvaṃsa-Tīkā.* Cf. Wilhelm Geiger, *The Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvaṃsa and Their Historical Development in Ceylon* (Colombo: Government Press, 1908), p. 58: "The founding of the Buddhist church in Ceylon forms the most important subject of the first half of the *Mahāvaṃsa.* The author has here completely exhausted his sources. Nowhere do the *Mahāvaṃsa* and *Dīpavaṃsa* agree so entirely as in this place. Both works reproduce the Aṭṭhakathā almost exactly."

9. *Divyāvadāna* and *Aśokavadāna* (Chinese version: A-yu-wang-tchuan), as well as the accounts of the travels of Fa Hien, Hiuen Tsang and I-Tsing, constitute the main Mahāyāna sources of information on Aśoka.

10. Lithic records of Aśoka, hitherto discovered, are classified as Minor Rock Inscriptions (4 texts), Rock Edicts (16 texts), Cave Inscriptions (3 texts), Minor Pillar Inscriptions (2 texts), Pillar Inscriptions (2 texts), Pillar Edicts (7 texts). Some among these 34 main texts are found in many versions. With repetitions, over 200 inscriptions have so

far been found, the latest being the Greek adaptation of RE XII and RE XIII discovered at Kandahar in Afghanistan in 1963.

11. For example, Vincent A. Smith rejected the Sri Lankan Pali sources using such expressions as the "the silly fictions of mendacious monks," "tales told by monkish romancers," "grotesque and contradictory," "overlaid with superstitious imbecilities and distorted by sectarian and ecclesiastical bias," "a tissue of absurdities," "elaborately falsified Chronicles of Ceylon," and "not of doubtful authority but positively false." Reviewing his *Aśoka,* Anagārika Dharmapāla said in 1906: "Notwithstanding the malignant attacks on Ceylon Chronicles we are grateful to Mr. Smith for the service he has rendered to the cause of oriental research in having compiled the two works 'Aśoka, the Buddhist Emperor' and the 'Early History of India': *Return to Righteousness,* edited by Ananda W.P. Guruge, (Colombo: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1965), p. 784. Rhys Davids was specially evenhanded: not only did he say that "No hard words are needed: and we may be unfeignedly grateful to these students and writers for having preserved as much as we can gather from their imperfect records," but he also characterized the critics of Sri Lankan Chronicles, adding: "It may be human to kick down the ladder by which one has just climbed up. But we need not do so, in this case, with too great violence. We may want it again. And it jars upon the reader to hear the Chronicles called the 'mendacious fictions of unscrupulous monks.' Such expressions are inaccurate: they show a grave want of appreciation of the

points worth considering." T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India* (London, 1902), pp. 274–275.

12. Senerat Paranavitana, *Ceylon and Malaysia* (Colombo: Lake House Investments, 1966), pp. 71 and 113.
13. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica,* Vol. 3, p. 406.
14. Cave Inscriptions I and II at Sudama and Visva Jhopri caves on Barabar hills.
15. Mhv. X, 102.
16. Smp. (PTS) I, 44.
17. B.M. Barua, p. 23.
18. Macphail, p. 19.
19. B.M. Barua, p. 23.
20. For a comprehensive account which draws from the Sri Lankan Pali sources, see G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* (London: Indian Texts Series, 1938), s.v. *Asoka.*
21. The Gujarra text of this MRE is slightly modified. It begins as follows: "I have now been a lay follower of the Buddha for two and a half years…. It is now more than a year since the Saṅgha has been intimately associated with me and I have been exerting myself in the cause of Dharma…."
22. Rhys Davids, *American Lectures,* p. 6 (quoted also in *Buddhist India,* p. 273: "It is not too much to say that without the help of the Ceylon books the striking identification of the King Priyadassi of the inscriptions with the King Asoka of history would never have been made. Once

made, it rendered subsequent steps comparatively easy; and it gave to Prinsep and his coadjutors just that encouragement and element of certainty which were needed to keep their enthusiasm alive." Cf. also J.R. Jayawardane, *Buddhist Essays*, 5th. ed. (Colombo: Government Press, 1983), p. 39.

23. Wilhelm Geiger, *The Mahāvaṃsa* (Colombo: Ceylon Government Press Information Department, 1950), pp. xix–xx.

24. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, p. 284. His interpretation of a three-stage progress in Aśoka's spiritual development is no longer accepted as the Abhisambodhi that he visited ten years after the coronation is now recognized as the sacred Bodhi Tree at Buddha Gaya.

25. Ibid., p. 284.

26. Macphail, p. 32.

27. B.M. Barua, p. 32.

28. The conquest of directions, as the term literally means, is closely linked to the Aśvamedha sacrifice. Two epigraphically recorded *dig-vijayas* in historical times are those of the Jain King Khāravela (circa 25–5 B.C., Hathigumpha Cave Inscription) and Gupta Emperor Samudragupta (circa 330–375 A.D., Allahabad Stone Pillar Inscription).

29. William D. Whitney, *Sanskrit Grammar* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941), p. 102.

30. MRE II, which is a continuation of MRE I and hence datable twelve years after Aśoka's coronation, enjoins the Rajjukas and Rāshtrikas to spread his Dharma. That was before the specialized cadre of Dharma-mahāmātras

were instituted. Duties and functions of these officers are outlined in RE V and PE VII. As RE XV and RE XVI are certainly after the institution of Dharma-mahāmātras, their absence in Kalinga is significant.

31. See my article "Edicts" in the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism,* Vol. V, (Colombo). It has been shown how all the edicts of Aśoka, hitherto found, constitute 13 edicts, drafted on a common schema. RE XI–XIII fit into this schema and hence should be regarded as a single edict issued by Aśoka.

32. See also Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India,* pp. 299–304. Equally important as inscriptions on the relic-caskets of Moggaliputta Tissa and some of the missionary monks are the bas reliefs of the Eastern Gateway at Sānchi. These have been identified as depicting Aśoka's initiative in sending a sapling of the sacred Bodhi Tree to Sri Lanka. The decorative motifs of peacocks *(moriya)* and lions *(simha)* are interpreted to symbolize Mauryan-Sinhala relations which this gateway represents.

33. Author of *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi, 1961) and of the contribution on Aśoka in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 15th. ed., Vol. IX.

34. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 15th. ed., Vol. IX., p. 352.

35. B.M. Barua, Part II, p. 60.

36. The basic list of Dharmas recur throughout Aśoka's edicts and inscriptions. Cf. MRE II and RE XI.

37. For a discussion of the main characteristics of popular Buddhism, see Ananda W.P. Guruge, *Buddhism: The Religion and*

its Culture, 2nd. ed. rev. (Colombo, 1984), Chapter VIII.

38. B.M. Barua, p. 7.

39. The identification of Alikasundara with Alexander of Corinth (252–244 B.C.) is chronologically untenable.

40. See my *Mahāvaṃsa An Annotated New Translation with Prolegomena,* (Colombo: Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd., 1989), Chapter VII of the Prolegomena. Also note MRE IV in Greek and Aramaic where Aśoka claims to have begun propagating "piety" in the tenth year.

41. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, *pp.* 298–299.

42. Ibid., pp. 301–302.

43. Mhv. XII,. 1–8; Dpv. VIII, 1–3.

44. Mhv. XII, 5 and 34.

45. Mhv. XII, 6.

46. Mhv. XII, 39–40.

47. See Wilhelm Geiger, *Mahāvaṃsa*, p. 85 footnote.

48. Mhv. XI, 33–35.

49. Mhv. XI, 32.

50. *Kalyāṇi* (Kelaniya University Journal), II, (1983), pp. 52–60.

51. Only in the versions of MRE I found at Maski and Gujarra is Aśoka referred to by that name.

52. Such an analysis is attempted in my later article: "Emperor Aśoka's Place in History: A Review of Prevalent Opinions." See Chapter 7 of this volume.

4
Aśoka's Edicts and the Third Buddhist Council

N.A. Jayawickrama

THE ATTENTION PAID SO FAR to those edicts of Aśoka which make specific reference to Buddhism is somewhat meagre in contrast to his other edicts, with the possible exception of the Bhabru Edict. The lofty ideals and enlightened outlook evinced in the edicts have been of great interest to the student, and in his eagerness to treat the material before him as a whole, some aspects of the edicts have been overlooked. Events of great significance in Aśoka's reign find no direct mention in the edicts, while others like the conquest of Kalinga are dwelt on at length as they have a direct bearing on his central theme dharmavijaya, "Conquest by Righteousness." Aśoka's emphasis on his dharma, "Moral Law," and his "Conquest by Righteousness" have more or less thrown into insignificance the statements he makes in the Minor Rock Edicts of Brahmagiri I, Rūpnāth, Bhabru and Maski regarding his conversion to Buddhism and association with the Saṅgha, etc., and his deep concern for the unity and general welfare of the Saṅgha which find expression in the Minor Pillar Edicts of Sārnāth, Kosambī and Sañci. The Lumbinī and Nigliva Pillar Edicts too are essentially "Buddhist" edicts while Rock Edict VIII mentions Aśoka's visit to the Buddha's seat of enlightenment.

The central theme in the majority of the above edicts is the welfare of the Saṅgha. The opening lines of the Bhabru Rock Edict refer to Aśoka's reverence for the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha: "King Piyadassī of Magadha expresses his respectful greetings to the Saṅgha and enquires after their health, well-being and general comfort. Sirs, the extent of my reverence and devotion to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha is known to you. Whatever, Sirs, has been declared by the Buddha, the Exalted One, has been well declared. And, Sirs, what may be pointed out by me that the good Teaching shall endure for long, that I deserve to say."[1] He next proceeds to prescribe seven disquisitions of the Dhamma to be learned and retained in mind by monks and nuns and lay male and female disciples.[2]

The Minor Pillar Edicts of Sārnāth, Kosambī and Sañci are similar to one another as regards their contents. The unity of the Saṅgha and the punishment meted out to those who cause dissension in the Saṅgha find mention in them. The Sārnāth Edict, though a line or two are partially defaced, says: "In Pāṭa(liputta)…. (It shall not be possible) for any one to divide the Saṅgha. Whosoever monk or nun will divide the Saṅgha shall be made to wear white garments and compelled to live in a non-monastic dwelling. Thus this command shall be communicated to the Saṅgha of both monks and of nuns." Next he instructs as to where the edict should be posted and enjoins the Mahāmātras to enforce the rule of expelling the schismatics. The Kosambī Edict, though brief, in essence contains the same injunction: "The Mahāmattas of Kosambī (are commanded)…. (the Saṅgha) has been united…. is not to be found among the Saṅgha…. Whosoever monk or nun will divide the Saṅgha shall be made to wear white garments and compelled to live in a non-monastic dwelling." The Sañci version goes one

step further in describing the lasting effects of Aśoka's unification of the Saṅgha. He says: "The Saṅgha of monks and of nuns has been united to remain so to the time of my children and grandchildren and as long as the sun and the moon endure. Whosoever monk or nun will divide the Saṅgha shall be made to wear white garments and compelled to live in a non-monastic dwelling. What is my intention? It is that the Saṅgha, united, shall endure for long."

In the Lumbinī Pillar Edict Aśoka refers to his visit, in the twentieth year of his consecration, to the Buddha's birthplace where he constructed a stone monument[3] and set up a pillar and exempted the village of taxes. In the Nigliva Minor Pillar Edict reference is made to his having rebuilt, in his fourteenth year after consecration, the stūpa to Konāgamana Buddha, and of a second visit paid in the twentieth year when he set up a pillar there. He also undertook a pilgrimage to the *sambodhi,* "the place of enlightenment of the Buddha," in the tenth year of his consecration.

These and a fair proportion of Aśoka's other edicts bear testimony to his direct connections with Buddhism. The edicts of Brahmagiri (No. 1), Rūpnāth and Maski refer to his having been a lay disciple of the Buddha for over two and a half years; he had not made much progress for one whole year, and after he has had closer associations with the Saṅgha for a period of over one year, i.e. out of the full period of two and a half years as an *upāsaka,* he began making great progress in the Dhamma.[4] Aśoka's words are quite clear with regard to the period he had *saṃghaṃ upayīte,* "gone to the Saṅgha (for guidance)," though the edicts are often mistranslated as Aśoka having entered the Saṅgha either as a monk or as a *bhikkhugatika,* a close follower of the monks. In doing so, too much reliance has been placed

on a statement made by I-tsing[5] that he had seen Aśoka represented in the garb of a monk in sculpture, but "the supposed representations of Aśoka in the Sānchi sculptures show him dressed like a king and surrounded with all the paraphernalia of a king."[6] However, Mookerji's interpretation that Aśoka became *a bhikkhugatika*[7] can hardly be justified. Later on at p. 109 he reiterates the point but adds a more plausible explanation equating it to his becoming a *sāsanadāyāda,* "an heir of the Dispensation," as the Pali sources[8] would have it, though it certainly does not imply a formal change in the status of the disciple unlike in the case of becoming a *bhikkhugatika.* The phrases *saṃghe upayīte, saṃgha upete, saṃghaṃ upagate* in the three edicts are better interpreted along with the reference made in the Pali records that Aśoka studied the teaching of the Buddha under Moggaliputta Tissa.[9] The edicts merely state that he had closer associations with the Saṅgha for over a year though he had nominally been an *upāsaka* for two and a half years.

The closer association leading to "greater progress" may have consisted in his studying the Dhamma under the Saṅgha. Evidently, it was as a result of the study of the Dhamma that he was inspired by the everyday ethics of Buddhism, which he in turn inculcated in his edicts, all published after his conversion to Buddhism.[10] This is supported by B.M. Barua[11] who rejects the views of Bühler and Kern that Aśoka temporarily became a monk giving up the kingship; and of Vincent Smith that while remaining king he assumed monastic vows. He also criticizes Kern for taking the phrase *saṃghaṃ upagate* to mean a state visit to the Saṅgha to make a public profession of his faith, but states that Aśoka lived among the monks as an *upāsaka.*[12]

All these references are of great significance in discussing Aśoka's personal religion and the Dhamma he advocated and promulgated among his subjects. This subject has been comprehensively dealt with from several angles making use of the same evidence sometimes to establish divergent points of view. Whatever conclusion one arrives at, two facts have to be kept in mind: first, that nothing in the edicts goes counter to the teaching of the Buddha; and second, that all his edicts were published after his conversion to Buddhism. A recent addition to the literature on Aśoka's *dhamma* is made by R. Basak in his *Aśokan Inscriptions* (already referred to), pp. xxii ff., where he establishes that it is the Buddha's Dhamma. In this connection, however, it is interesting to note that offences punishable by law are not mentioned in the edicts, and that it is only the avoidance of misdeeds that lie outside the scope of the common law and the inculcation of good deeds which cannot be enforced by law that are recommended.

Beside all this, a reference to an event of far greater significance is to be seen in the edicts cited. This has so far escaped the attention of Aśokan scholars as the event has not been specifically mentioned. Barua[13] very nearly mentions it but hazards no inference. What has been omitted from the edicts is adequately supplemented by the Sri Lankan Pali Chronicles and the *Samantapāsādika*. Scholars are emphatic that the Third Buddhist Council held at Asokārāma in Pāṭaliputta finds no mention in the edicts. Some have even gone to the extent of denying its historicity while others grudgingly concede that there was a Council under Moggaliputta Tissa but maintain that it was a mere "party-meeting." By rejecting the testimony of the Pali sources, whose tradition was not very far removed from the dates of the three Councils, and by accepting the

confused accounts of the Sanskrit Schools preserved in translation in Tibetan and Chinese, the travellers' tales of Fa Hien and Hiuen Tsang to whom the living tradition was no longer available, in preference to the Pali accounts, attempts have been made to identify the Second and Third Councils.[14]

The charge that the Pāṭaliputta Council was only a party-meeting can be summarily dismissed as the only form of Buddhism that the Pali accounts refer to and perhaps Aśoka patronized is the Theravāda , while the Chinese accounts, with the exception of *Sudarśana-vibhāṣā Vinaya* (trans. of Smp.), confuse Kāḷāśoka with Aśoka. Although the Mahāsanghika split is recorded as having taken place after the Second Council, no reference whatever is made to other Schools of Buddhism in connection with the accounts of the Third Council. The Saṅgha is said to have been cleansed of the *titthiyā,* "heretics," who are enumerated at Smp. I, 53. The *Kathāvatthu,* however, which was finalized at the Council presupposes the existence of other Schools when it refutes their views. Seventeen Schools, excluding the parent Theravāda, are said to have arisen in the second century after the Buddha,[15] yet it is strange that the accounts carefully avoid mentioning them in connection with the interruption of the *uposatha, saṅghakamma, gaṇakamma* and so forth, which resulted in the disunity of the Saṅgha (see below). Apparently the only form of Buddhism that the accounts refer to is the Theravāda and it is the Theravāda that was established in "the border districts," including Sri Lanka. Further, the seven "disquisitions of Dhamma" mentioned in the Bhabru Edict are passages that can be identified with Pali texts[16] and evidently they are not to be taken as forming parts of the Sanskrit Canon. The suggestion that they formed parts of a Prakrit Canon is based on the fact that the

names of the suttas are given in the local Prakrit in use in and around Bairat in Aśoka's day. Hence, as far as Aśoka was concerned, he was an adherent of the Theravāda.

Before proceeding any further it would be useful at this stage to briefly recount the narrative from the Pali sources. The most comprehensive account of the Third Council in Pali is found in the introductory chapter *(bāhiranidāna)* of the *Samantapāsādikā,* the Vinaya Commentary of Buddhaghosa, though both the chronicles *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa* deal with it to a satisfactory extent. It would suffice to give the *Samantapāsādikā* version here:"

> In this manner there arose great gain and honour to the Dispensation. The heretics, whose gain and honour had dwindled to the extent of their failing to obtain even their food and raiment, gained admission into the Order in the Dispensation in their eagerness for gain and honour, and each propounded his speculative theory claiming it to be the Dhamma and the Vinaya. And those who failed to gain admission to the Order, themselves shaved off their hair, and wearing yellow robes wandered about in monasteries intruding at the *uposatha* and *pavāraṇa* ceremonies and at formal acts of the Order and of the Chapter. The monks did not perform the *uposatha* ceremony in their company.
>
> Thereupon the Elder Moggaliputta Tissa handed over the leadership of the Chapter to the Elder Mahinda, thinking, "Now this dispute has arisen, it will soon be aggravated, and it is not possible to settle it living in their midst." Wishing to abide at peace as he was wont to, he retired to the hill near Ahogangā. And in spite of the heretics being subjected to censure by the Order of monks in respect of the Dhamma and the Vinaya and the Teaching of the Master, they gave rise to diverse forms of upheavals, stains and thorns in the Dispensation, as they did not conform to the principles in accordance with the Dhamma and

> the Vinaya. Some of them tended the sacrificial fire, some subjected themselves to the heat of the five fires, some worshipped the sun following its movements in the sky, while others made a determined effort to destroy the Dhamma and the Vinaya. At that time the Order of monks held neither the *uposatha* nor the *pavāraṇa* with them.
>
> The *uposatha* at Asokārāma was interrupted for seven years. They informed the King too of this matter. The King commanded a minister to go to the monastery and settle the dispute and revive the *uposatha.*

Next follows the description of the minister's abortive attempt at uniting the Saṅgha, by beheading the monks. The King was greatly upset that he was responsible for the killing. Moggaliputta Tissa was with great difficulty persuaded to come back to Pāṭaliputta, and he finally reassured the King that he was not responsible for the minister's misguided act.

The narrative continues:[18]

> In this manner the Elder reassured the King: and living there in the King's park itself, for seven days he instructed the King on the Teaching.[19] On the seventh day, the King had the Order of monks assembled at Asokārāma, and having had an enclosure of screens put round, he sat within that enclosure, and separately grouping together monks who held divergent views, and summoning each group of monks he asked, "What teaching did the Perfectly Enlightened One declare?" Then the eternalists replied that he was an etemalist. The qualified etemalists, the propounders of the theory of finiteness and infinitude, the eel-wrigglers, casuists, those who held theories of conscious existence, non-conscious existence, neither conscious nor non-conscious existence, annihilationists and those who professed Nibbāna of this life, replied (in accordance with their views). Since the King had already studied the Teaching he realized that they were not monks but heretics belonging to foreign sects;

and giving them white clothes he disrobed them. They numbered sixty thousand in all. He next summoned the remaining monks and asked, "What teaching did the Perfectly Enlightened One declare?"

"Great King, he was an exponent of the analytical doctrine."

When it was said thus, the King asked the Elder, "Did the Perfectly Enlightened One expound the analytical doctrine?"

"Yes, Great King."

Thereupon the King said: "Sir, the Dispensation is now pure; let the Order of monks hold the *uposatha*."[20] And giving them his protection he entered the city. *The Order, united in perfect harmony (samaggo), assembled and held the uposatha.*[21]

The *Dīpavaṃsa* gives two versions of the account of the Council in one and the same chapter, at Dpv. VII, 35–43 and 44–59. The stanza Dpv. VII, 53 succinctly points out the precise role of the King in uniting the Saṅgha and bringing about its purification. It runs:

Therassa santike rājā uggahetvāna sāsanaṃ
theyyasaṃvāsa-bhikkhuno nāsesi liṅganāsanaṃ.

The King, who had studied the Teaching under the Elder, destroyed the outward emblems of those who had furtively entered the Order.[22]

The parallel account in the *Mahāvaṃsa* commences at Mhv. V, 228 and proceeds to the end of the chapter with no significant variations from the Smp. version. The manner of disrobing the heretics is not so graphically described and clearly stated in the *Mahāvaṃsa* as at Dpv. VII, 53 and Smp. 1, 61. The stanza Mhv. V, 270 merely states, "The King had all those heretics disrobed, and all those who were disrobed numbered sixty thousand." The Saṅgha then being united, performed the *uposatha* as Mhv. V, 274 states *(Saṅgho samaggo hutvāna tadākāsi uposathaṃ).*

In the foregoing data we have two independent sources to go by: the edicts and the Pali accounts of the Third Council. The common factors of both sources are (1) the uniting of the Saṅgha, and (2) the disrobing of heretics.

The Pali sources confirm Aśoka's role in bringing about unity in the Saṅgha. While the edicts confine themselves to these two events, the Pali accounts go much further and continue the narrative right up to the despatch of missionaries to the border districts. The legitimate inference from this silence of Aśoka is that he was interested only in making known the things he was directly responsible for. The Council was held by Moggaliputta and as such Aśoka cannot be expected to claim any credit for it. Thus the repeated mention of his bringing about unity in the Saṅgha and the reference to the punishment to be meted out to schismatics eloquently speak of his contribution towards the stabilization of the Sāsana while the silence in the edicts regarding the Council is a still more eloquent tribute to the actual author of the Council.

With all the evidence available before us, there is no justification for denying the historicity of the Council. According to the Pali sources, he united the Saṅgha by disrobing the heretics and giving them white clothes, or in other words, by removing the outward emblems of a monk. This is exactly what he did as may be inferred from the edicts. Aśoka's command that whosoever disrupts the Saṅgha shall be made to don white clothes and be compelled to live in a dwelling other than a monastery, is a mere reminiscence of what he actually did at the time he united the Saṅgha. There is no justification at all to construe that this statement was made in a vacuum, thinking of a future eventuality only, especially when it is followed by the reference to his having united the Saṅgha

in the previous sentence. All events and statements are to be viewed against their background and the only possible background one can conceive of is the unsettled conditions of the Sāsana during the years prior to the Council, the Council itself being the logical conclusion resulting in the unification of the Saṅgha. The dissension in the Saṅgha was brought about by the *theyyasaṃvāsaka* heretics who clandestinely lived among the monks; and Aśoka's warning is against the repetition of such activity which will merit the same punishment as he had meted out earlier. With all the evidence from Pali sources and circumstantial evidence, it would be highly unhistorical to suggest that Aśoka was thinking of a punishment he would mete out at a future date and that the statement has no reference to anything he actually did.

The fact that most of the edicts are dated (from the year of Aśoka's consecration) helps us to determine that the Council was anterior to the edicts.[23] The unification of the Saṅgha mentioned in three of the edicts is a matter of very great significance in the eyes of Aśoka and it is meaningless to speak of uniting the Saṅgha without there being any disunity. It is here that the Pali accounts fill the gap left in the edicts, as the general background which brought about chaos in the Order is graphically described in them. Further, when a reigning monarch, a *cakkavatti rājā,* takes a step of this nature resulting in far-reaching consequences, it is to be inferred that the necessary setting has been provided. He would not have acted unless. the situation demanded his intervention. It is to be expected that the purification of the Saṅgha was conducted with all ceremony and formality appropriate for the occasion. The opportunity was provided to the King at the assembly of monks prior to the actual recital at the Council.

Aśoka cannot be expected to decide for himself who the real bhikkhus and who the heretics were. He too did not consider himself competent to judge who the upholders of the Doctrine were and who were not. He needed the help of the monks to decide this. It was very necessary that he should receive instruction on the Dhamma to carry out this task. His earlier ignorance of the Dhamma is to be inferred from the statement in the *Samantapāsādikā* that Moggaliputta instructed the King on the Teaching and that he was able to judge the heretics as a result of this. His utter dependence on Moggaliputta is reflected in his having to look to him for advice even when the true bhikkhus reply that the Buddha was a Vibhajjavādin. The phrase *saṃghaṃ upagate* in the edicts too definitely expresses Aśoka's earlier ignorance of the Dhamma and the two things evidently are one and the same, as mentioned earlier.

With the advice of the bhikkhus he was now in a position to judge the heretics; and the purification of the Saṅgha was a thing that needed his immediate attention. There should be a suitable occasion for this and there is no better opportunity for it than at a formal meeting of the members of the Saṅgha, and this was at the time of the Third Council. The Council was held in his imperial capital of Pāṭaliputta, in his own monastery of Asokārāma, and it is inconceivable to think of a Council without his being associated with it and having given it his blessing and patronage.

The Elders who conducted the Council do not claim to have united the Saṅgha. As in the edicts, in the Pali sources too, the King is responsible for uniting the Sangha[24] and the Elders next proceed with the affairs of the Council. The manner in which Aśoka brought about the purification of the Saṅgha has already been mentioned. Here, too, the Elders do not claim any respon-

sibility for disrobing the heretics. All temporal authority was vested in the King and this has confirmation in a statement attributed to Ajātasattu in connection with the First Council, *mayhaṃ āṇācakkaṃ tuyhaṃ dhammacakkaṃ,* "mine is the wheel of authority and yours the wheel of the Dhamma" (Smp. I, 10). The bhikkhus would not undertake the task of disrobing individuals though they could pass a *pabbājaniya kamma,* "a formal act of excommunication." The assistance and support of the temporal authority was required in carrying out the actual expulsion and in this case it was Aśoka who came to the assistance of the Saṅgha. When Aśoka says in his edicts that those who bring about dissension in the Order shall be disrobed, he does not give expression to a new idea that has occurred to him. His role in the historic unification of the Saṅgha at Pāṭaliputta, participating in the preliminary proceedings of the Council, is still fresh in his memory and this warning is intended to serve as a deterrent to individuals prone to dividing the Order at a future date.

To this extent it may be said that the edicts refer to the Council, and it is like throwing away the baby with the bath (as Geiger puts it) if we persist in rejecting the historicity of the Council, paying scant respect to the general trustworthiness of the tradition embodied in the *Samantapāsādikā* and the Sri Lankan Pali chronicles and that too, in spite of the corroborative evidence from the edicts which has hitherto been neglected. The edicts certainly do not refer to conditions obtaining at the time they were issued though one may be tempted to imagine so, for the Council was held long before these edicts were issued[25] and there is nothing to indicate that the chaos that prevailed prior to the Council had again returned while the Sāsana was making rapid progress throughout the Empire and beyond,

and while Aśoka who meted out such severe punishment to the miscreants was still reigning.

Hence the Pali accounts are quite clear as regards Aśoka's role at the Council while they are corroborated by the evidence from the edicts. His edicts too, true to his sense of propriety in not claiming for himself what he was not directly responsible for, make no reference to the part played by the Elders whose work really began when Aśoka had attended to the all-important task of purifying the Saṅgha. The Council alone is not mentioned specifically though everything that transpired preparatory to the Council is mentioned. There is every reason to believe that the statement *saṃghe samage kaṭe*[26] is an allusion to Aśoka's work prior to the Council and none other; and the argument from silence, which itself is invalid, to deny the historicity of the Council is no longer tenable when the fresh evidence thus available from the edicts is used along with the traditional accounts of the Council in the Pali sources.[27]



Notes

1. More than anywhere else in the inscriptions, here in the Bhabru Edict, the term *dhamma* clearly refers to the Dhamma of the Buddha in contrast to the wider meaning that scholars are apt to assign to it. Other references to the Dhamma are not wanting in the edicts (see R. Basak, *Aśokan Inscriptions*, p. 158), but it is not intended here to enter into an unending controversy on the connotation of the term *dhamma* in the edicts. Suffice it to say that nowhere in the edicts does Aśoka specifically mention any *dhamma* other than the Buddha's Dhamma and none of the principles of his "Moral Law" goes counter to the teachings of the Buddha. The so-called two senses in which he used the term *dhamma* are in effect one and the same.

2. The seven *dhaṃmapaliyāyāni* (P. *-pariyāyāni*) of Aśoka have been more or less satisfactorily identified. *Vide* T.W. Rhys Davids, J.P.T.S., 1896, pp. 93 ff.; J.R.A.S., 1893, pp. 693 ff.; Dharmananda Kosambi, I.A., 1912, pp. 37 ff.; Radhakumud Mookerji, *Aśoka*, pp. 117 ff.; A.J. Edmunds, J.R.A.S., 1913, p. 387; B.M. Barua, J.R.A.S., 1915, pp. 809 ff.; S.N. Mitra, I.A., 1919, pp. 8 ff.; D.R. Bhandarkar, *Aśoka*, pp. 85 ff.; J.D.L. (Calcutta) XX, pp. 1 ff.; Sylvain Lévi, J.A., 7, pp. 475 ff.; H. Oldenberg, *Vinaya Pitakam* I, pp. xl ff.; Hultzch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, 1, pp. 172 ff. Also *vide* U.C.R. I, 1, pp. 63 ff., VI, 4, pp. 229 ff.

   The seven passages are:

   (1) *Vinayasamukase* (P. *Vinayasamukkaṃsa*), "The Exaltation of the Discipline," identified as the Tuvaṭaka Sutta of Sutta Nipāta, Sn. 915 ff. I agree with Bhandarkar here (*Aśoka*, pp. 87 ff.).

(2) *Aliyavasāni* (P. *Ariyavaṃsāni),* "The Noble Lineages," identified as the Ariyavariṃsa Sutta of Aṅguttara Nikāya, A. II, 28 (S.N. Mitra).

(3) *Anāgatabhayāni,* "The Future Dangers," generally agreed as the Anāgatabhaya Sutta of Aṅguttara Nikāya, A. III, 100 ff.

(4) *Munigāthā,* "The Stanzas on the Sage," identified as the Muni Sutta of Sutta Nipāta, Sn. 207 ff. (Rhys Davids).

(5) *Moneyasūte* (P. *Moneyyasutta),* "The Discourse on Saintly Life," identified as the Moneyya Sutta (i.e. Nālaka Sutta without the *vatthugāthā*) of the Sutta Nipāta, Sn. 699 ff. (*Vide* U.C.R. VI, 4.)

(6) *Upatisapasine* (P. *Upatissapañha*), "The Question of Upatissa," correctly identified as Sāriputta Sutta of Sutta Nipāta, Sn. 955 ff. by Dharmananda Kosambi.

(7) *Lāghuvāde musāvādaṃ adhigicya* (P. *Rāhulovādo musāvādaṃ adhigacca),* identified as the Ambalaṭṭhika Rāhulovāda Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya, M.I., 414 ff. (Rhys Davids).

3. The word used is *silāvigaḍabhī* generally explained as *śilā-vikṛtabhitti* but a more plausible explanation is given by R. Basak, *Aśokan Inscriptions,* p. 150, that it stands for *silā-āvir-gardabhī,* "a she-ass clearly carved out of stone," serving as a capital to the pillar. He supports his explanation on the testimony of Hiuen Tsang, who refers to this pillar as having a horse capital and that he may have mistaken the *gardabhī* for a horse.

4. *Vide* Brahmagiri Rock Edict I: "It is over two and a half years since I have been a lay-disciple (of the Buddha),

but I did not make great progress for one year. It is over a year since I have gone up to the Saṅgha (for guidance) and have made great progress." A variant in the Maski Edict states: "I have been a follower of Buddha, the Sakyan… gone up to the Saṅgha."

5. Takakusu, translation, p. 73.
6. Radhakumud Mookerji, *Aśoka*, p. 23, n. 1.
7. Ibid.
8. *Samantapāsādikā* (Smp.), I, 50.
9. See note 19 below.
10. *Vide* Mookerji, *Aśoka*, p. 37, for chronology of Aśoka's reign.
11. B.M. Barua, *Inscriptions of Aśoka* II, pp. 334 ff.
12. The reader is referred to Barua's conclusion (ibid., p. 337).
13. Ibid. II, 378 ff.
14. *Vide* Geiger, Mhv. transl., pp. lix ff., for a clear analysis of the confusion.
15. Mhv. V, 11.
16. See n. 2 above.
17. Smp. I, 53 ff.
18. Smp. I, 60 ff.
19. The word used is *samayaṃ*, "philosophy" or "system of philosophy." But Mhv. V, 265 is more specific in referring

to it as *sambuddhasamayaṃ,* "the Teaching of the Perfectly Enlightened One," while Dpv. VII, 53, merely uses the word *sāsana,* "the Message."

20. The *uposatha* is an essential feature in the unity of the Saṅgha. Hence the great emphasis laid on it.

21. Smp. next mentions that Moggaliputta Tissa recited the *Kathāvatthu* refuting heretical views and held the Third Council rehearsing the Dhamma and the Vinaya and cleansing the Dispensation of all stains.

22. The outward emblems of the *theyyasaṃvāsakā* — "those who live clandenstinely with the bhikkus" — are the yellow robes. They were disrobed and given white garments, as the Smp. and edicts state.

23. 218 A.B. works out to 265 B.C., taking 483 B.C. as the date of the Buddha's *parinibbāna.*

24. At Smp. I, 61, the King says, *suddhaṃ dāni bhante sāsanaṃ, karotu bhikkusaṅgho upasathaṃ:* "Sirs, the Dispensation is now pure, may the Order of monks hold the *uposatha.*" It adds later, *samaggo saṅgho sannipatitvā uposathaṃ akāsi,* "The Order assembled, and united, held the *uposatha.*" Mhv. *V*, 273 ff. too states:

> *"Saṅgho visodhito yasmā, tasmā saṅgho uposathaṃ*
> *karotu bhante" icc' evaṃ vatvā therassa bhūpati*
> *saṅghassa rakkhaṃ datvāna nagaraṃ pāvisī subhaṃ*
> *saṅgho samaggo hutvāna tadākāsi uposathaṃ.*

"Since the Order has been purified, may the Order, Sirs, hold the *uposatha,*" saying thus to the Elder, the King

gave protection to the Order and entered his beautiful city. The Order being united (in harmony), then held the *uposatha.*

25. *Vide* Radhakumud Mookerji, *Aśoka,* p. 37.

26. The reader is referred to Dr. B.M. Barua's *Inscriptions of Aśoka,* II, 378 ff. where he has given comprehensive notes and observations on the Schism Pillar Edict. He concludes: "By the consensus of opinion the text of Aśoka's ordinance confirms the authenticity of the Pali tradition concerning the third or Pāṭaliputra Council. Strictly speaking it throws some light on the truth behind the tradition concerning the *samāgama* or assembly of the community of bhikkus which preceded the Council."

27. While the edicts go up to this point, the discovery of the caskets containing the relics of the missionaries who were despatched after the Council gives us further data in support of the Council.



5
Aśoka and the Emergence of a Sinhala Buddhist State in Sri Lanka

Anuradha Seneviratna

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1. Introduction

In the annals of the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka there is no event of greater significance recorded than the founding of Buddhism as the religion of the state in the third century B.C. It was none other than Emperor Aśoka of India who was responsible for introducing Buddhism to this island. As a result Sri Lanka later became the most important centre of Theravāda Buddhism and came to be known as the *dhamma-dīpa,* the Island of Righteousness.

Aśoka, who is often referred to as Dhammāsoka in the chronicles of Sri Lanka, was a firm believer in *dharmavijaya,* the concept of conquering the world by righteousness without the use of weapons; he was also by his personal actions a perfect example of the Buddhist ideal of a *cakravartin,* a Universal Monarch. After the disastrous Kalinga war in which thousands of people died, he established a kingdom of righteousness. As a Buddhist *upāsaka* or faithful lay devotee he gave royal patronage for the spread of the Buddha's teachings and further helped to transform the Buddha's Dispensation from a local belief system into a world religion. Though himself a Buddhist he supported other faiths and urged his subjects to respect sincere followers of all religions. The morality that he preached was of a universal nature. He shared his faith and

philosophy of life with others living in and outside his vast dominion. For him, the teachings of the Buddha provided salvation from the suffering of the world and the misery of life. He looked after all human beings as his own children *(savve manusse pajā mamā)* and endeavoured to inculcate in human society conduct that would bring happiness to all.

As tradition has it, Sri Lanka benefitted from the friendly association between Aśoka and his contemporary, the Sri Lankan King Devānampiya Tissa, in creating a *dhammadīpa*, or Island of Righteousness, based on the Buddha's teachings. The responsibility of safeguarding the doctrine fell upon the Sinhala people. The aim of this essay is to examine the actual role played by Aśoka in the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the light of evidence available to us from historical and literary sources.

2. Sources

There are a number of traditional sources which help us to study the relationship between Aśoka and Devānampiya Tissa in connection with the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. They are basically divided into two categories, namely, Sri Lankan and Indian, which some scholars call the Southern and Northern traditions respectively. The most important historical sources belonging to the Sri Lankan tradition are:

1. the *Dīpavarṃsa* (4th century A.C.);
2. the *Mahāvaṃsa* (5th century A.C.);
3. the *Samantapāsādikā*, the Commentary to the Vinaya Piṭaka by Ācariya Buddhaghosa (5th century A.C.);
4. the *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*, the Commentary to the *Mahāvaṃsa* (9th century);

5. the *Mahābodhivaṃsa* (10^{th} or 11^{th} century);
6. the *Thūpavaṃsa* (13^{th} century); and
7. the *Dhātuvaṃsa* (14^{th} century).

Unfortunately, the inscriptional material of Sri Lanka is of no value to our study.

Among the Indian sources the most useful are the *Aśokāvadāna* (2^{nd} century A.C.), the *Divyāvadāna* (2^{nd} century A.C.), the *Aśokasutra,* and the Pillar and Rock Edicts of Aśoka; the account found in *A-yü-wang-chuan,* the Chinese version of the *Aśokāvadāna,* is also important. The Sri Lankan source material is the product of the Theravāda school while the Indian material, except the Aśokan inscriptions, is the product of other Buddhist schools of the Northern tradition.

The Sri Lankan Pali sources, the *Dīpavaṃsa, Mahāvaṃsa, Samantapāsādikā* and *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī,* have drawn heavily upon a single source: the *Sīhalaṭṭhakathā,* the Sinhalese commentaries. These were available to the commentator Buddhaghosa in the 5^{th} century, and also to the author of the *Vanisatthappakdsini,* in the 9^{th} century, but are no longer extant. The derivative sources available to us sometimes differ from one another in minor details.

The author of the *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* states clearly that the *Mahāvaṃsa* is a Pali translation and a versification of the *Sīhalaṭṭhakathāmahāvaṃsa,* which was in Sinhalese prose, belonging to the Mahāvihāra of Anuradhapura.[1] The authors of the commentaries to the *Mahāvaṃsa* and the Vinaya Piṭaka provide more such information on certain matters, showing that the author of the *Mahāvaṃsa* had not exhausted the material already available to him. G.P. Malalasekera therefore

concluded that the *Mahāvaṃsa* was an adaptation, a work of eclectic character, the author having obtained his materials from diverse sources and then sifted them with great care and attention to accuracy of detail according to his own views.[2] The oldest chronicle is the *Dīpavaṃsa,* which includes an account of Aśoka and of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. This work contains numerous mnemonic verses, which proves that the traditions dealing with the life of the Buddha and the history of the Buddhist dispensation were originally oral accounts that were gradually incorporated into the commentaries.[3] To these were added a list of the kings of Magadha and legends about King Aśoka.[4] The *Samantapāsādikā,* in its introduction *(bāhiranidāna),* describes in detail the three Buddhist Councils, the patronage given by Aśoka to the Third Council, and the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. The *Sumangalavilāsinī,* the commentary to the Dīgha Nikāya, gives details of the First Great Council.[5] Therefore, scholars are of the opinion that the *Mahāṭṭhakathā* dealt with similar topics and that they were incorporated later by the authors of the Pali chronicles and still later by commentators like Buddhaghosa.

A number of Oriental scholars such as Oldenberg, Geiger, Bechert, Malalasekera, Mendis and Godakumbura have expressed different opinions about the identification of the sources of the early chronicles. But despite these differences, all the scholars and historians on the early historiography of Sri Lanka agree that the early sources have a common theme: Sri Lanka is the land of Buddhism *(dhammadīpa)* and the duty of every Sinhalese is to protect and nourish Buddhism. *Dīpavaṃsa,* the earliest chronicle, records the triumphs of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.[6]

3. The Mission to Sri Lanka: Brief Account

Aśoka, after ascending the throne of Magadha, followed an expansionist policy and conquered Kalinga in 260 B.C. This conquest made a deep impression on his mind and attracted him to the humanistic teachings of the Buddha. According to tradition, Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism was due to the meeting of two different monks. The *Aśokāvadāna* says that it was on seeing the magical powers of a monk named Samudra that Aśoka took refuge in the Buddha and Dhamma.[7] But according to the *Mahāvaṃsa*[8] and *Samantapāsādikā*[9] Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism was due to a monk named Nigrodha, a novice of peaceful demeanour who one day happened to pass by Aśoka's royal courtyard. Taken up by his restraint, self-control, disciplined movements, and guarded senses, it occurred to him: "All these people are confused in mind and are like the perturbed deer; but this one is not confused in mind, surely within him there is bound to be some transcendental virtue." The king's mind was pleased with the novice and there arose love towards him. The king invited him in and asked him what doctrine his master taught. Nigrodha preached to him the chapter on diligence from the Dhammapada and Aśoka, impressed upon hearing this, was won over to the doctrine of the Buddha. He then purified the Saṅgha with the help of the Thera Moggaliputta Tissa. The Pali Canon of the Theravāda tradition as it exists today was also finally redacted at a council, the third to be held after the passing away of the Buddha, which was supported by Aśoka. At the conclusion of this Great Council the Elders sent missionaries to preach Buddhism in the outlying provinces of the Mauyra Empire and elsewhere. Special importance was paid to the

mission to Sri Lanka by assigning Aśoka's son, the Thera Mahinda, to this task.

The king of Sri Lanka at the time was Muṭasīva, who was very old. Mahinda therefore waited until the king's son Tissa succeeded him. Tissa is said to have been a friend of Aśoka even before his elevation to the throne. After succeeding his father as king, Tissa sent envoys with presents to Aśoka. In return Aśoka sent everything that was necessary for a royal consecration.

Just a month after the consecration, Mahinda Thera arrived in the island. According to the Sri Lankan tradition the meeting between Mahinda and Tissa took place at Missakapabbata or Cetiyagiri (now Mihintale), on the full-moon day of Poson (May-June). There Mahinda preached the Dhamma to Tissa, and the king with his retinue took refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. On the following day they moved to the capital Anuradhapura. The king offered to the Saṅgha his royal Mahāmegha Park, where he eventually built the first Stupa in Sri Lanka, the Thūparāmā, to enshrine bodily relics of the Buddha. Meanwhile Princess Anulā, wife of Tissa's younger brother, expressed the desire to become a bhikkhunī, a Buddhist nun. As it was not possible for Mahinda Thera to ordain a nun, envoys were sent to Aśoka requesting him to send his daughter, the Theri Saṅghamittā, to Sri Lanka with a branch of the Sacred Bodhi Tree from Buddha Gaya. The branch of the Bodhi Tree was accompanied by different clans of artisans to perform the necessary rituals. Saṅghamittā Therī and the other nuns embarked at Tāmralipti and sailed to Sri Lanka, landing at Jambukola.

Saṅghamittā and the Bodhi branch were received with great veneration and ceremony by Tissa himself. The sapling

was planted in the Mahāmegha Park at Anuradhapura. Saṅghamittā Therī established the order of nuns *(bhikkhunī-sāsana),* while her brother Mahinda Thera established the order of monks *(bhikkhu-sāsana)* in Sri Lanka.

The above is a very brief summary of the long account recorded in the historical sources about the conversion of King Tissa and the people of Sri Lanka to Buddhism.

The account recorded in the Pali sources is undoubtedly overlaid with edifying legends and miraculous events. Few such events can be identified as simple historical facts. Whether myth or history, the following are the principal points that emerge from the Sri Lankan sources:

1. the timing of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka;
2. the common royal titles of Aśoka and Tissa;
3. their Sakyan connections;
4. the exchange of gifts between the two kings;
5. the sending of regalia for Tissa's consecration by Aśoka and the conferment of royal titles on the missionaries;
6. Aśoka's Buddhist missions to various countries and the Third Buddhist Council;
7. the sending of Aśoka's son and daughter to Sri Lanka;
8. the sending of the Buddha's relics by Aśoka to Sri Lanka for the enshrinement and construction of a stūpa;
9. the transplanting of the Bodhi sapling in Anuradhapura;
10. the establishment of the Buddhist dispensation in Sri Lanka by training local monks in the Dhamma (doctrine) and the Vinaya (discipline).

4. The Political Background

During Aśoka's period there was likely a migration of Indo-Aryan people from the Gangetic plain, especially from Magadha, to Sri Lanka. The script and language of the Brahmi inscriptions from the time of Aśoka's and Tissa's reigns testify to this thesis. The language employed by the missionaries to preach the Dhamma to the local populace was no doubt indicative of the common relationship between the two groups of people. But, as some historians point out, caution is necessary when studying the early history of Sri Lanka since the chronicles were written by Sri Lankan Buddhist monks who depicted Aśoka from an orthodox Buddhist standpoint.[10] The major events in the history of Buddhism as recorded in the chronicles are constantly linked with the royalty. Some of the events that took place in India prior to the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka can be cited as examples, e.g. the Second and Third Buddhist Councils held respectively at Rājagaha and Pāṭaliputta with Ajātasattu and Aśoka as patrons. The events that led to the Third Council are important since the Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka gave credit to King Aśoka for supporting the Theravāda school, thereby preserving the orthodox form of Buddhism. It was after the council held at Pāṭaliputta that the Elder Mahinda, the son of Aśoka, was sent to Sri Lanka to head the Buddhist mission, followed later by Saṅghamittā.

While these and other events associated with the early history of Buddhism may be correctly reported in Pali sources in Sri Lanka, some scholars argue that it is also plausible that the link with the Maurya king was an afterthought to enhance the prestige of the Theravāda sects.[11] There is no reason to

disbelieve these events associated with King Aśoka since the Sri Lankan and Indian traditions mutually agree that King Aśoka was the only Buddhist monarch who then ruled the vast dominion of India and gave patronage to the propagation of Buddhism within and outside his dominions. But the Sakyan connection of Aśoka and Tissa is suspicious since it seems a deliberate *ad hoc* attempt on the part of the Sri Lankan monks to connect Aśoka and Tissa with the Sakyan clan to which Gotama Buddha belonged.

According to Indian *purāṇa* traditions, the Nandas were of the Sudra caste. Chandragupta Maurya, who succeeded the Nandas in 321 B.C., belonged to the Moriya tribe; his caste was therefore low as the family apparently were Vaishyas.[12] The *Divyāvadāna* maintains that the Mauryas were of Kshatriya origin.[13] At the death of Chandragupta's son, Bindusāra, in 272 B.C. practically the entire Indian sub-continent had come under Maurya suzerainty and the extreme south was also ready to submit. Only one area remained hostile: Kalinga. This was left for Bindusāra's son Aśoka[14] who in the eighth year campaigned successfully against Kalinga. In the words of the Maurya Emperor: "A hundred and fifty thousand people were deported and a hundred thousand were killed and many times that number perished in other ways."[15]

The battle with Kalinga, which brought death and destruction to thousands of people, filled the king with remorse. In order to console himself Aśoka found refuge in the teachings of the Buddha. This was not an overnight conversion but, as one inscription says, it was two and a half years after the battle that Aśoka became a zealous devotee of Buddhism.[16] Deep sensitivity to the cruel consequences. of war worked a revolution in the character of Aśoka. Says the Kalinga edict: "Directly

after the conquest of Kalinga the Beloved of the Gods became keen in the pursuit of Dharma. The chief conquest is not that by war but by Dharma *(dharmavijaya).*"[17] Radhakumud Mookerjee says that the violence of war seen in all its nakedness made Aśoka turn completely towards non-violence *(ahiṃsā)* as his creed. He changed his personal religion and definitely adopted Buddhism, which of all the then prevailing religions of India stood most clearly for the principle of non-violence.[18] But the Sri Lankan sources make no mention at all of the Kalinga war. Instead the Sri Lankan chronicles attribute Aśoka's conversion to Nigrodha Samanera, whose disciplined composure awakened Aśoka's confidence in Buddhism.[19] Many other variations on the theme of Aśoka's conversion are found in the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Divyāvadāna.*

In relation to Sri Lanka the province of Vanga to the north-east with Tamralipti within his dominion was the principal port. It was an important place since the missions between Sri Lanka and India at that time took place between Tamralipti and Jambukola-Gokanna ports in Sri Lanka. The Maurya power in South India is identified by the presence of Aśokan inscriptions not far from south Mysore. Aśoka was on friendly terms with the Choḷas, Pandiyas, Satyaputras and Keralaputras,[20] though he did not actually rule the country of the Tamils in South India.[21] Thapar thinks that the Tamils were also friendly, otherwise Aśoka would have tried to conquer them to ensure peace.[22]

His new concept of life, that the "chief conquest is that achieved by Dharma, and not by brute force," was further emphasized by his saying that his sons and grandsons should not think it their duty to make any new conquests (Rock Edict XIII). This attitude made him known as "Dhammāsoka"

and he saw to it that his actions supported his new thinking, especially when he was dealing with Sri Lanka, which was outside his dominion *(vijita).*

With regard to his relationship with Sri Lanka the Pali chronicles have much to contribute. The Sinhalese literary sources maintain that Aśoka and Tissa were not only friends but they had been brothers in a previous birth.[23] Both the Pali and Sinhala sources maintain (despite the Indian non-Buddhist tradition) that they belonged to the Kshatriya caste, and further, that they had connections with the Sakyas to which the Buddha himself belonged. The Sinhala *Bodhivaṃsaya* says that the city of Moriya was founded by Sakyan princes and to their Kshatriya clan was born Chandragupta, the grandfather of Aśoka. According to the same source Aśoka married Vedisā, a princess of the Sakyan clan.[24] Pali chronicles such as the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvaṃsa* state that the Viceroy Aśoka fell in love with the beautiful Devī, the daughter of a local merchant. Two children, a son named Mahinda and a daughter named Saṅghamittā, were born to them.[25] The Sakyan connection of Devī related in the *Mahābodhivaṃsa* is almost certainly a fabrication of a later tradition which the author himself adopted in his work as an attempt to connect Mahinda with the family of the Buddha. However, Vidisa was an important centre of Buddhism during Aśoka's time. Devī also built a *vihāra* there.

According to the *Mahāvaṃsa,* Mahinda was just twenty years old when he was ordained in the sixth regnal year of Asoka.[26] According to the same source, Asandhimittā was Aśoka's chief queen. She died five years before his death, after which Tissarakkhā became the chief queen.[27] This queen is supposed to have injured the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya.[28]

5. The Sri Lanka-Kalinga Tie

The political relationship between Sri Lanka and India during this period is very important in order to assess the religious developments in the years that followed. The conquest of Kalinga by Aśoka probably had a political impact on Sri Lanka because of the ethnic relationship between the two countries. It seems probable that Sri Lanka's political and cultural relationships with the Kalingas at the time would have encouraged both Aśoka and Tissa to develop a close and friendly alliance. There is no reference to the Kalinga war in the Sri Lankan chronicles. Rock Edict XIII of Aśoka clearly states that the war took place in the ninth regnal year of Aśoka, probably 260 B.C. Before the Kalinga war there would have been a constant influx of Kalinga immigrants to Sri Lanka. This number would have increased during the war because of the misery caused to the people and the loss of human life. The missionary activities of the Elder Mahinda and the diplomatic mission of the two kings succeeded without any problem because of the common cultural ties between the two states.

It is now known that the language and script of the early Sinhalese and Kalingas during the Aśoka-Tissa reign have much in common. This made it possible for the religious missionaries to undertake a responsibility which required that they enter into direct dialogue with the royalty and the common man. The presence of a large number of immigrants from the northeastern part of India at the time in the "realm of the kings" *(rajaraṭa)* in Sri Lanka may have been the main factor. Further, if we assume that there was a large Sinhala population of Kalinga origin in Sri Lanka at this time, then it might be held that Aśoka, troubled by a guilty conscience over the massacre

at Kalinga, would have paid special attention to Sri Lanka to compensate for his wrongdoings, and that he expressed this concern by introducing Buddhism to the island.

According to the tradition preserved in the *Mahāvaṃsa*, the first king of Sri Lanka, Vijaya, was descended from a princess of the Kalingas.[29] Vijaya's father founded Sinhapura and the region over which he reigned is modern Bengal. The mention of Kalinga and Magadha in the elaboration of details is in accord with this.[30] Basham, who commented on this event and the Aryanization of Sri Lanka, says that a recollection of the Aryan colonization of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) is preserved in the Vijaya traditions which leads to the possibility that from Kalinga an early wave of immigrants came to Sri Lanka.[31] These ties between the two countries seem to have developed through events such as various missionaries travelling through Kalinga, the bringing of the Sacred Tooth Relic from Kalinga in the fourth century, and a Kalinga king taking political refuge in Sri Lanka during the seventh century. These ties were further strengthened by matrimonial alliances starting with Mahinda IV (956–972 A.C.) and continuing thereafter. Jayabāhu I (1110–1111 A.C.) had a consort named Tilokasundarī brought from the Kalinga kingdom. Again, Parākramabāhu I (1153–1186 A.C.), who had no son to succeed him, invited a prince (Kalinga Cakravarti) to take the throne on his death. Under the name Vijayabāhu II (1186–1187 A.C.) he became the first ruler of Sri Lanka to come from Kalinga. Several other kings who ruled Sri Lanka during the medieval period, such as Nissankamalla, Vikramabāhu, Coranāga, Sāhasamalla and Māgha, also had Kalinga origins.

The most famous Sinhala writer of the medieval period, Gurulugomi, author of the Sinhala classics *Amāvatura* and

Dharmapradīpikā of the 13th century, is suspected by some critics to have been a Kalingan. The story of the princess Kalinga related in the *Dharmapradīpikā* written in pure Sinhala is described as *Kālinga-eḷuwa* (Kalinga-Sinhalese language). This evidence further supports the belief in the ties between the Sinhala language and people and the Kalingan language and people, a belief that is current even today.[32]

In the 12th century, King Nissankamalla of Kalinga origin proclaimed at the capital of Polonnaruwa that the city of Sinhapura from which he hailed was identical with the city of the same name in Kalinga from which Vijaya also arrived.[33] He claimed to belong to the royal line of the Okkaka (Iksvaku) dynasty.[34] Magadha, which is associated with the Vijaya legend, was the area where the largest number of Buddhist adherents lived. This new doctrine later spread to other parts of India. The Sakyans, as seen from historical evidence, were a lineage society and their ancestry goes back to the Iksvaku line, or Okkaka, as it is called in Pali sources. The Kshatriya status of the clan, as Thapar says, is evident from the Iksvaku connection.[35] Thus it is possible that by the third century B.C. the Kalinga and Magadha states were linked with Sri Lanka both culturally and politically and that Sri Lanka, after the Kalinga war, was naturally disposed to accept the Mauryan throne.

The Buddha Dhamma or Teaching of the Buddha was Aśoka's special gift to Sri Lanka. In his own words, what Sri Lanka received from him was the "reverberation of religious proclamation" *(dharmaghoṣa)* instead of the "reverberation of the war-drum" *(bherighoṣa)*.[36] For this purpose he made use of the *dhammadūtas,* the messengers of the Dhamma, in the first instance, and later on the venerable Buddhist monks as real

missionaries to propagate the Buddha Sāsana in the island. Aśoka must have given Sri Lanka a special place in his missionary activities because of the guilt he felt for his crimes committed at Kalinga, particularly in recognition of the historical ties between Sri Lanka and Kalinga.

6. Aśoka and Tissa

According to the Pali chronicles Tissa was the second son of Muṭasīva. As suggested by the same sources this dynasty of kings also had connections with the Buddha's Sakya clan. The *Mahāvaṃsa* relates that Vijaya, just before his death, sent word to his brother Sumitta to come and rule this island. But as Sumitta was already ruling Sinhapura at Kalinga, he sent his son Paṇḍuvāsudeva to Sri Lanka. The latter married Bhaddakaccānā, the daughter of Paṇḍusakka of the Sakya clan, and they were consecrated king and queen of the island. Pandukabhaya, one of the sons, later succeeded him to the throne. Mutasiva was his son and Tissa his grandson. In this way the chroniclers have depicted the Sakya relationship with the early Sinhala kings, thus bringing about an ethnic union of the Sinhala race with Buddhism.

On the death of his father Tissa ascended the throne with the usual consecration *(abhiseka)*, and this event is said to have been accompanied by the miraculous appearance of priceless items in his dominion. One such was a *veḷuyaṭṭhi*, a bamboo staff which served as the royal insignia.[37] It is also asserted that Tissa had been an unseen friend of Aśoka even before he become king, implying that there were political and cultural connections between his father and Aśoka even before his accession to the throne.

However, after becoming king, Tissa decided to send

envoys bearing valuable presents to Aśoka. The mission consisted of Tissa's nephew, Ariṭṭha, a brahmin chaplain, a minister and the treasurer. Aśoka received the envoys and the gifts with much pleasure. In return he conferred on them ranks, namely, commander of the army *(senāpati)* on Ariṭṭha, the rank of chaplain *(purohita)* on the brahmin, the rank of general *(daṇḍanāyaka)* on the minister, and the rank of guild-lord *(seṭṭhi)* on the treasurer. It should be noted that these titles were already held by them. Further, Aśoka also sent to Tissa all requirements for his re-consecration as king: a fan, a diadem, a sword, a parasol, shoes, a turban, ear ornaments, etc. The envoys stayed five months at the Magadha capital. On their return they were asked by Aśoka to convey to Tissa this important message: "I have taken, refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha; I have declared myself a lay disciple in the religion of the Sakya son. Seek then even thou, O best of men, converting thy mind with believing heart, refuge in these best of gems." He also said, "Consecrate my friend yet again as king." And when the envoys returned to Sri Lanka, fulfilling the charge of Aśoka, they consecrated Tissa again as king.

Three questions arise from the above account:

1. Why did Aśoka reconfer the royal titles already given by Tissa on his ministers?

2. Why did Tissa have himself consecrated for the second time with the objects sent by Aśoka?

3. Can it be assumed that Aśoka sent his own *dūtas* or royal emissaries to Sri Lanka along with Tissa's envoys on their return?

To the first question the answer is that the re-conferment of the royal titles by Aśoka meant that he confirmed them, thereby tacitly acknowledging Tissa's position as king of Lanka. The re-consecration of Tissa meant that Tissa accepted the suzerainty of Aśoka as the emperor of the whole Indian sub-continent, including Sri Lanka. This is quite clear when Satyaputras, Kerala-putras, Cholas and Pandyans in the South are included in the list of countries under his rule. As one historian points out, it is quite possible that the remaining southern rulers "having had experience of the Mauryan arms from the campaigns of Bindusāra, probably preferred to give pledges of friendship like the other southern kingdoms of India, and remain in peace."[38]

The chronicles make it clear that no ritual of consecration was performed at the royal court in ancient Sri Lanka prior to the introduction of Buddhism. Instead, the *navayaṭṭhi* or new staff was used by the new king as a symbol of regal authority. It was Aśoka who, for the first time, introduced the consecration ceremony of the Indian tradition, with Tissa as the first on the throne in Sri Lanka. This leads us to believe that earlier there were no *rājas* or kings ruling the island but only leaders of the community, who were called *gamaṇi.* As S. Paranavitana remarks in the *University History of Ceylon:* "When Tissa began his rule he only had the title of *gamaṇi,* and the real purpose of the mission that he sent to Aśoka, was to obtain the support of the great Indian Emperor for his assumption of royal honours, so that he might be acknowledged as such by the other *gamaṇis* and *parumakas* in Sri Lanka."[39]

After the consecration, Tissa also adopted the royal title of his "Cakravarti" Emperor Aśoka and became known as Devanampiyatissa, "Beloved of the Gods," and modelled himself after Aśoka. Commenting on this Paranavitana says:

> The adoption by Tissa of the title of Devānampiya, which is not known to have been used by members of dynasties other than Aśoka's, would also indicate that kingship was an institution introduced to Ceylon under the influence of the Mauryan emperor. Aśoka would have readily agreed to lend his support to Tissa in the latter's desire to be proclaimed as king, for by that he would have brought the island of Ceylon, the southernmost limit of the Indian world, within the Mauryan sphere of influence. The island also would have served as a base for the extension of Mauryan influence to the Tamil kingdoms which lay outside the borders of Aśoka's empire. In short, such a request from Tissa of Ceylon would have afforded Aśoka an excellent opportunity to put into practice the policy that he adopted of conquering not by force of arms, but by means of the Dhamma.[40]

Envoys *(dūta)* were appointed by Emperor Aśoka to spread the Dharma, therefore it is quite reasonable to assume that he also sent envoys to Sri Lanka with the message of his conversion to Buddhism and a request that Tissa adopt a similar course of action. Sri Lanka is referred to as Tāmraparṇi in Rock Edicts II and XIII in connection with Aśoka's missionary and health-care activities abroad. The countries already included by Aśoka in the list are those to which he despatched his envoys to pursue his scheme of Dharmavijaya or Moral Conquest. Rock Edict II says that when he had been consecrated for thirteen years, religious tours by his officials named Dharma-Mahāmātras were further expanded. This new department sent out envoys conveying Aśoka's religious message to foreign countries both in the north and south and both to neighbouring and distant states, "as far south as Tāmraparṇi. As the edicts say, the message was taken in the dominions of His Majesty the Emperor as well as among the bordering territories *(pratyantesu).*

Rock Edict II itself is dated back to 258–257 B.C. and there-

fore Mahinda Thera's Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka several years later could not have been inscribed in the edict. Mookerji is of the opinion that the reference to *dūtas* and their activities in Sri Lanka, which is described as a success in the Rock Edict II, speaks of Aśoka's relation with the island. This relationship may have prepared the ground for Mahinda's missionary work in the years that followed."

Romila Thapar assumes the year 486 B.C. to be the date of the *parinirvāṇa* or passing away of the Buddha. Accordingly she takes Aśoka's accession to the throne as the year 268 B.C. Aśoka ruled for thirty-seven years and therefore died in the year 232 B.C.[42] According to the Sri Lankan sources Mahinda's visit to Sri Lanka took place 236 years after the passing away of the Buddha, which is 250 B.C. and in the eighth regnal year of Aśoka.[43] According to Pali sources, accession to the throne of Anuradhapura by Tissa seems to have taken place in the year 250 B.C., just before Elder Mahinda's visit to the island. This means that *dūtas* or royal envoys were sent to Sri Lanka during the reign of Mutasiva, i.e. Tissa's father. If, as the evidence indicates, Tissa ascended to the throne in 250 B.C., while Aśoka was sending emissaries of Dharma to Tāmraparṇi already in 258 B.C., this implies that such emissaries must have already been arriving in Sri Lanka during the reign of Mutasiva, Tissa's father. However, the Pali sources suggest that prior to the arrival of Mahinda, almost every religious sect then existing in India claimed adherents in Sri Lanka except Buddhism. The most cogent way to resolve the discrepancy is that suggested by E.W. Adikaram:

> Silence was observed with regard to their existence (i.e. that of the Buddhists) in order to create a dark background on the canvas on which the enthusiastic narrator of Buddhist history might

> successfully paint his glowing picture of Mahinda's miraculous conversion of the island. Buddhism did exist in Sri Lanka prior to the visit of Thera Mahinda though it was only after Devānampiya Tissa's conversion that it became the state religion of the country.[44]

Ultimately, this led to the formation of the monastic order and thereby the establishment of the Buddha Sāsana in the island.[45]

7. The Advent of Mahinda

The account of Elder Mahinda's advent is narrated in the Pali chronicles *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa* and in the Vinaya commentary, the *Samantapāsādikā,* the latter being in agreement with the *Mahāvaṃsa.*

According to these chronicles Mahinda's advent took place only after the Third Council. While some Indian scholars like Romila Thapar, who regard the Pali sources as unreliable, doubt this account,[46] the Third Council itself and the missionary work which followed it are accepted as factual by the majority of scholars. In Sri Lanka, the chronicles and the other Pali sources are held in such high esteem because their accounts are further confirmed by the Schism Edict in which Aśoka speaks of continued unity of the Saṅgha and the expulsion of dissident monks and nuns.

The Third Buddhist Council was held at Pāṭaliputta with the Thera Moggaliputta Tissa presiding over it. After the council was concluded Buddhist missionaries were sent to various parts of the Indian subcontinent and to the neighbouring countries. Mahinda Thera was sent to Sri Lanka in the twentieth regnal year of Aśoka, in 249 B.C.

The *Mahāvaṃsa* gives us the names of the missionaries

and the countries they visited.[47] This list is repeated in the *Samantapāsādikā* in detail. With regard to the names of the individual missionaries Mookerji says that the truth of the legend has been unexpectedly confirmed in some inscriptions found in the stūpas of Sānchi of the second or first century B.C.,[48] where names of the missionaries referred to in the chronicles are inscribed.[49] An inscription at Mihintale belonging to the first century mentions Mahinda and this is confirmed by documentary evidence in Sri Lanka as wells.[50] A similar inscription was found at Rajagala where the relics of both the Elder Mahinda and his companion the Elder Itthiya are enshrined in a stūpa. Palaeographically this inscription belongs to the 2nd century B.C.[51]

After the Third Great Council held at Pāṭaliputta, according to the chronicles, Mahinda was requested by his preceptor Moggaliputta Tissa to visit Sri Lanka and establish the Buddhist Dispensation. Mahinda concluded that it was not the proper time to go there since Mutasiva, the reigning monarch, was old and it was not possible to establish the Dispensation under his patronage. Accordingly, Mahinda awaited the accession of Mutasiva's son Tissa to the throne and spent time visiting relatives and his mother at Vedisagiri. After the death of Mutasiva, Tissa ascended the throne of Anuradhapura. It was then that Tissa sent gifts to Aśoka with a missionary. The Elder Mahinda, who spent a month at Vedisagiri accompanied by six others, sprang up from the mountain Vedisa, and after travelling through the air, he landed on the Missakapabbata (Mihintale) near Anuradhapura on the full-moon day of Jeṭṭhamula (May–June). It seems that Mahinda took about seven months to visit Sri Lanka after the Pāṭaliputta council. This long delay may be accounted for as the time taken for the journey by the

monks because they spent some time in South India as well, where, according to the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang, they undertook other missionary work.[52]

The second contact between the two kings, Tissa and Aśoka, came about through the novice Sumana, a grandson of Aśoka, who accompanied the Elder Mahinda to the island. He was sent back by Mahinda Thera to Aśoka with the request for the right collar-bone of the Buddha to be enshrined in a stūpa built in Anuradhapura. The request was granted by Aśoka and the stūpa, later known as the Thūpārāma dagoba, was built in the city. Constructed according to Mahinda's instructions, the stūpa introduced Mauryan art and architecture to Sri Lanka. The idea of utilizing stones for building purposes and making rock abodes for monks was also introduced to the island from Mauryan India.[53] Sixty-eight caves at Mihintale were constructed by Tissa for the benefit of the monks living there and for the daily increasing number of persons entering the Saṅgha as monks. With full royal patronage the new faith spread rapidly in the island. Eminent men including those of the royal family sought refuge in the Buddha Dhamma.

8. Saṅghamittā and the Bodhi Tree

The king's sister-in-law Anulā wished to join the order of Buddhist nuns. As Mahinda could not confer ordination on her since it had to be done by a bhikkhunī, he requested Tissa to send a message to King Aśoka inviting Saṅghamittā, his daughter and Mahinda's full sister, to come to Sri Lanka to establish the order of Buddhist nuns.[54] According to the Sri Lankan chronicles, Saṅghamittā was the daughter of Aśoka and Videsa Devī. Prior to her ordination she had been married to Aggibrahmā, a nephew of Aśoka, who also entered the

order.[55] Their son Sumana was a member of the Sri Lankan mission. Mahinda is also said to be a child of the same Aśoka-Devī union, though Asandhimittā was the legitimate chief queen of Aśoka.

Ariṭṭha, the nephew of Tissa, was summoned by the king to be sent a second time to Pāṭaliputta to fetch Saṅghamittā and also a branch of the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment.[56] Ariṭṭha and his companions embarked at Jambukola as before, arrived at Pāṭaliputta in due course, and delivered Tissa's message to Aśoka. The *University History of Ceylon* describes this incident in the following manner:

> The Indian monarch, though loathe to send his daughter to so distant a place, agreed to the request for the sake of propagation of the Dhamma that was so dear to his heart. He also made preparations to obtain the branch of the Bodhi Tree. Aśoka's visit to Bodh Gaya for this purpose, the severance of the branch from the sacred stem, the transportation of the sacred object befittingly placed in a vase to the capital and then to the seaport were all accompanied by brilliant pageantry and manifestations of unbounded religious fervour. Different clans of artisans to perform the various services necessary for the Bodhi Tree also accompanied the sacred object. The Therī Saṅghamittā entrusted with the care of the sacred object and other nuns embarked at Tāmralipti and with Ariṭṭha and his companions in attendance, performed the voyage back to Sri Lanka.
>
> Entering the city through the north gate, the Bodhi branch was taken through the south gate to the spot selected for its installation. In the presence of Mahinda Thera, Kshatriyas of Candanagama and Kajaragama and Brahmana Tavakka, the Bodhi branch was finally planted on the terrace prepared for it. The presence on this occasion of the ruling princes of outlying districts and the Brahmana at the invitation no doubt of

> Devānampiyatissa was a form of their acknowledging the paramountcy of the latter.[57]

As we can see from the Sri Lankan Pali sources, Buddhism by now had been established in the island in its manifold aspects, namely the monastic order, comprising the monks and the nuns, residences for them, and shrines for the devotees. When these were accomplished King Tissa questioned Mahinda Thera whether the law of the Buddha had been well established in the island. The reply of the Elder was that it had indeed been planted but had not yet taken firm root. He explained further that Buddhism will take root only when a person born in Sri Lanka of Sri Lankan parents studies the Vinaya in Sri Lanka and expounds it in Sri Lanka. Ariṭṭha, who had joined the Saṅgha after his return from India, had become proficient in the Vinaya. Therefore an assembly of monks was convened at the Thūpārāma and Ariṭṭha Thera, occupying a seat equal to that of Mahinda Thera, expounded the Vinaya. The significance of this event is described in the *Concise History of Ceylon* in the following words:

> It is evident from this that Mahinda wished to make the Saṅgha of Sri Lanka an independent and truly national institution. The wisdom of this policy has been amply demonstrated by the course of events in the history of Buddhism in Ceylon, for the kings and people worked upon the Buddhist church as an institution that they had to maintain and defend at all costs."

With regard to the last years of Aśoka's reign, the *Mahāvaṃsa* says that in the twenty-ninth year of his reign his chief queen Asandhimittā died and in the fourth year after this he raised Tissarakkhā to the rank of chief queen. Two years later she is said to have been jealous of the king's devotion to the Bodhi Tree and therefore attacked it with a poisonous thorn, causing

it to wither away. But Aśoka managed to nurture and revive what was left of it and thus saved the tree. Aśoka is reported to have died in the year 233–232 B.C. in the thirty-seventh year of his reign, while Tissa was still ruling in Anuradhapura. The Sacred Bodhi Tree still exists in Anuradhapura.

Devanampiyatissa of Sri Lanka continued to rule the island for forty years, from 250–210 B.C. During the whole of this period Mahinda Thera and Saṅghamittā Theri engaged themselves in propagating Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Tissa was succeeded by his brother Uttiya. Mahinda Thera passed away in the eighth year of Uttiya's reign while spending the *vassāna* (rainy) season at Cetiyagiri (Mihintale).[59] He would then have been eighty years old. He may have come to Sri Lanka at the age of thirty-two and lived here for forty-eight years, setting an inspiring example to the people and the rulers. His sister Saṅghamittā Theri died the following year while she was living in the Hatthālhaka Vihāra.[60]

9. Conclusion

Given the account of Aśoka's remarkable activities associated with social and religious life in Sri Lanka, he seems to have paved the way for a truly national consciousness and a unique Sinhala-Buddhist identity in the island starting with the reign of King Devānampiya Tissa in the year 250 B.C. Aśoka changed after the Kalinga war as a result of his direct encounter with the suffering he had wrought. The noble message of the Buddha brought him consolation and peace of heart. He thereafter strove for the welfare of the people, whom he treated as his own children. He spread the teaching of the Buddha throughout his dominion and beyond it. In doing so he also tolerated the beliefs and practices of other religions through his new

concept of Dharma, the Universal Law, founded entirely on Buddhism.

He had a very special place in his heart for the people of Sri Lanka. It may have been the Kalinga war that prompted him to pay special tribute to Sri Lanka, or the friendship and open-mindedness of the people and their ruler may have made the island a special country to him. The message of the Buddha was sent to Sri Lanka through his own son Mahinda Thera and daughter Saṅghamittā Theri, who devoted their long lives for the well-being of the people of Sri Lanka. To them the whole nation is ever grateful.



Notes

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3. Frank Perera, *The Early Buddhist Historiography of Ceylon* (EBHC) (Gottingen, 1979), p. 40.
4. Ibid., p. 36.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 80.
7. John Strong, *Legend of King Aśoka* (Princeton, 1983), pp. 71–76.
8. Mhv. V, 37.
9. N.A. Jayawickrema, trans. and ed. *The Inception of Discipline and the Vinaya Nidāna* (London, 1986), pp. 40–43.
10. Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 8.
11. Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State* (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 145.
12. Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, (Penguin, 1984), 1:70.
13. Cowell and Neil, eds. *Divyāvadāna* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 370–409.
14. Ibid., p. 72.
15. Rock Edict No. XIII.

16. Thapar, *A History of India,* 1:72.

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18. R. Mookerji, *Aśoka* (Delhi, 1962), pp. 17–18.

19. Hermann Oldenberg, ed. *Dīpavaṃsa* (Dpv.) VI; Mhv. V, 37–72.

20. Rock Edict II.

21. Rock Edict XIII.

22. Thapar, *A History of India,* 1:75.

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24. Lionel Lokuliyana, ed. *Sinhala Bodhivaṃsaya* (Colombo, 1970), pp. 226–227.

25. Dpv. VI, 13–16, Mhv. XIII, 6–9.

26. See Mhv. V, 204–29.

27. Mhv. V, 85; XX, 2.

28. Mhv. XX, 3–6.

29. Mhv. VI, 1.

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33. *Epigraphia Zeylanica* (London, 1912–1927), 2:115.

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37. T.B. Karunaratna, "The Symbols of Regal Authority of Early Sinhalese Kings," JRAS (CB), (Colombo, 1987–1988), 32:45–62.

38. Thapar, *A History of India,* 1:75.

39. UHC, Vol. I, Pt. I, pp. 134–135. Also see Tilak Hettiarachchy, *History of Kingship in Ceylon* (Colombo, 1972), pp. 21–28.

40. UHC, Vol. I, Pt. I, p. 135.

41. Mookerji, *Aśoka,* p. 36.

42. Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas,* p. 64; *A History of India,* 1:88.

43. Samantapāsādikā (Smp.), I, 73.

44. E.W. Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Colombo, 1953), p. 47.

45. JRAS (CB), 1929, p. 282; Adikaram, *Early History, p.* 48.

46. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that Buddhist monks were already living in Sri Lanka as far back as two centuries prior to the official introduction of Buddhism to the island.

47. See *Ancient Ceylon*, No. 12 (Colombo, 1990), pp. 255 ff.

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49. A. Cunningham, *Bilsa Topes* (London, 1854), p. 287.

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51. UCR (Colombo, 1962), Vol. XX, No. 2, pp. 159–62.

52. Samuel Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World* (Boston, 1885), 2:230.

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54. Smp. I, 90.

55. Mhv. V, 170.

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58. C.W. Nicholas and S. Paranavitana, A *Concise History of Ceylon* (Colombo, 1961), p. 52.

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60. Mhv. XX, 48–49.

6
Images of Aśoka: Some Indian and Sri Lankan Legends and their Development

JOHN S. STRONG

KING AŚOKA, GREATEST MONARCH OF the Mauryan dynasty and first ruler of virtually all of India, is best known today for the edicts and inscriptions which he had engraved on pillars and rock faces all over the subcontinent. In these he tells the touching tale of his change of heart after the massacre of the Kalingas, and he proclaims his polity of rule by Dharma, his advocacy of tolerance, non-violence, and religious respect, and his concern for common moral decencies and for the welfare of all beings.[1]

The importance of the edicts for historical scholarship can hardly be minimized. They are first-hand contemporary documents, and in them Aśoka provides a firm chronological framework for the events of his reign.[2] But it is sometimes useful to think of the rock inscriptions not as solid blocks of historical fact, but as flightier pieces of political propaganda, as the campaign speeches of an incumbent politician who seeks not so much to record events as to present an image of himself and his administration to the world.

It is, of course, not the only image of Aśoka that we have; Buddhist texts of both the Pali and the Sanskrit traditions have, through the centuries, presented their own views of Aśoka, as have, for that matter, non-Buddhist sources.[3] But the edicts give us our earliest view of Aśoka and thus form a convenient

starting point for a study of the gradual development of the Aśoka legend.

Scholars have long debated the question of whether or not Aśoka himself actually became a Buddhist. While some claim that he became a layman (or even a monk), others dispute this, and, maintaining that his policies were solidly rooted in Hinduism, categorically state that Aśoka could not have been a Buddhist.[4] To be sure, the evidence on this is mixed. In a number of edicts, Aśoka appears to indicate his patronage of the Buddhist cause; he leaves an inscription at Lumbinī to record his pilgrimage to the Buddha's birthplace; he declares his reverence for the Triple Gem; he recounts his visit to Bodhgaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment; and, at one point, he even takes it upon himself to recommend certain sūtras to the community of monks.[5] On the other hand, it is clear that by "Dharma," Aśoka, in the edicts, means something rather different and more general than the specifically Buddhist understanding of that term, something more akin to the notion of "piety." This, in fact, is indicated by the Greek and Aramaic inscriptions of Aśoka discovered at Kandahar, where "Dhamma" is translated as *eusebeia* and *qsyt* respectively, terms which, as the late A.L. Basham has pointed out, "have no doctrinal or sectarian connotation whatever."[6] Suffice it to say, therefore, that on the basis of the edicts the evidence for Aśoka's specific and personal commitment to Buddhism is ambiguous at best.

It is important to remember, however, that traditionally Aśoka was not known through his edicts, since the Brahmi script in which they were written was forgotten soon after Aśoka's time and was not read again for centuries until its decipherment in 1837.[7] Instead, he was known through the

legends and stories that were told about him by Buddhists; and in these he is definitely shown to be a convert to and great supporter of the Buddhist order.

These Buddhist legends have been preserved in many languages — Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan and Chinese, not to mention vernacular tongues such as Burmese, Sinhalese, Thai, Laotian and Khotanese. Basically, however, it is possible to identify two primary recensions of the Aśokan legend: (1) a Sri Lankan one preserved in Pali in such texts as the *Mahāvaṃsa,* the *Dīpavaṃsa,* and the introduction to Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Vinaya, the *Samantapāsādikā;*[8] and (2) a North Indian one preserved principally in Sanskrit and Chinese in such works as the *Divyāvadāna,* the *A-yü wang chuan,* and the *A-yü wang ching.*[9] Later texts, as we shall see, tend to be developments of one or the other of these recensions or combinations of the two of them.

Scholars have often puzzled over the differences between the Sri Lankan and the North Indian versions of the Aśoka story. For example, in the Sri Lankan texts, much emphasis is put on Aśoka's role as a purifier of the Saṅgha. Acceding to the throne 218 years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa,* he purges the ranks of the monastic community with the help of the Elder Moggaliputta Tissa, defrocking no less than 60,000 bhikkhus judged to be heretical. He then convenes the Third Council at Pāṭaliputta, summoning the orthodox Theravādins to recite the true Dhamma. Following this, again with Moggaliputta Tissa's help, he dispatches Buddhist missionaries all over the world — to Kashmir and Gandhāra, to the Himalayas and the land of the Yonas, to Mahārāshtra and Suvaṇṇabhūmi — but most of all to Sri Lanka where he sends his own son Mahinda along with four other theras, Iṭṭhiya, Uttiya, Sambala and Bhaddasāla.[10]

In the North Indian tradition, however, no mention is made of any of these events.[11] There is no purge of the community, no reference to Moggaliputta Tissa, no talk of a Third Council or of missionaries. Instead, Aśoka is said to rule one hundred years after the *parinirvāṇa,* and prominence is given to his relationship with the Elder Upagupta, to his pilgrimage to the various important sites connected with the life of the Buddha, and to his holding of a *pañcavārṣikā,* a great quinquennial festival of merit. As to Aśoka's son Mahinda, no mention of him is made at all and place is given rather to the story of his son Kunāla.[12]

Much has been written discussing the significance of these differences. The chronological discrepancies between the dates of Aśoka's reign (B.E. 218 in the Sri Lankan tradition and B.E. 100 in the North Indian), for example, have plagued historically minded scholars and led some of them to posit two datings for the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* — the commonly accepted 483 (or 486) B.C.E. of the Theravadin era, and the increasingly respected 368 B.C.E. of the North Indian Sarvāstivādin reckoning.[13] Moreover, the North Indian tradition's complete silence about the Third Council at Pāṭaliputta has led some to doubt or to reevaluate its very historicity,[14] while the lack of references to Aśoka's son Mahinda has occasioned some jaded comments about the prominence given to him in Sri Lankan texts.

Despite these major divergences, however, a number of parallels do exist between the two recensions of the Aśoka legend, and it is these that I wish to focus on in the first part of this paper. I do so not in an attempt to recapture the exact history of the events discussed so much as to discover the paticularistic biases and perspectives of the texts discussing them. For, as we shall see, the Sinhalese chronicles and the

Sanskrit *avadānas* each have their own distinct viewpoints and concerns in retelling the Aśoka story. By examining the discrepant ways in which they have treated basically identical stories, we can come to identify more precisely these different viewpoints.

More specifically, I propose to look at four episodes of the Aśoka legend and to examine the ways in which they are presented in two representative texts — the *Mahāvaṃsa* (or Great Chronicle of the island of Sri Lanka) and the *Aśokāvadāna* (the legend of Aśoka as preserved in the *Divyāvadāna).* The four episodes are: (a) the tale of Aśoka's act of merit in a past life which resulted in his kingship; (b) the story of Aśoka's worship of the Bodhi Tree at Bodhgaya and its fate at the hands of Aśoka's queen; (c) the tale of Aśoka's collection of the relics of the Buddha from the nāga palace where they had been enshrined; and (d) the account of Aśoka's construction and dedication of 84,000 stūpas (or monasteries, in the Pali tradition).

Having examined the *Mahāvaṃsa's* and the *Aśokāvadāna's* versions of these four stories and identified the basic thrusts of their presentations, I would then, in the second part of this paper, like to go on and look at a number of later renditions of these same stories found not only in Pali and Sanskrit sources but also in Southeast Asian and Chinese texts. In these we will discover further modifications of the legends reflecting still more changes in the image of Aśoka.

My basic assumption here, then, is that Aśoka, regardless of what kind of king he actually was historically, is a figure that has meant different things to different people at different times, and that these differences can best be grasped by examining certain legends told about him and their evolution over the centuries.

A. The Early Traditions

1. The Gift of Honey and the Gift of Dirt

The tale of Aśoka's act of merit in a past life that resulted in his being reborn as a great king is told in slightly different terms in the *Mahāvaṃsa* and the *Aśokāvadāna.* The Sri Lankan chronicle's version of the story recounts the monarch's gift of honey:

> Once in time past, there were three brothers, traders in honey; one used to sell the honey, two would go to get it. Now a certain paccekabuddha was sick from a wound; and another paccekabuddha, who, for his sake, wished for honey, came even then to the city on his alms round. A maiden who was going for water to the riverbank, saw him. When she found out that he was looking for honey, she pointed with outstretched hand and said: "Yonder is a honey store, sir, go there".
>
> The paccekabuddha went there and the trader, with believing heart, gave him a bowlful of honey, so that it ran over the edge. And as he saw the honey filling the bowl and flowing over the edge and streaming down to the ground, he, full of faith, made a wish: "May I, for this gift, come by undivided sovereignty over Jambudīpa, and may my command reach forth a yojana upward into the air and a yojana downward under the earth."
>
> He then said to his brothers: "To a man of such and such a kind I have made an offering of honey; agree thereto since the honey is also yours."… Wishing to share in his merit-making, his brothers gave their sanction. Then the maid who had pointed out the store wished that she might in the future become the royal spouse of the trader.[15]

The story then goes on to identify the main characters involved: Aśoka was the merchant who gave the honey, his brothers who approved the gift became the novice Nigrodha and the Sri Lankan king Devānampiya Tissa, and the maiden

who pointed out the honey store became Aśoka's chief queen Asaṃdhimittā.[16]

A somewhat similar story is told in the *Aśokāvadāna:*

> One morning, when the Blessed One was dwelling at Kalandakanivāpa in the Veṇuvana near Rājagṛha, he put on his robes, took his bowl and entered the city for alms.... Soon he came to the main road where two little boys were playing at building houses in the dirt. One of them was the son of a very prominent family and was named Jaya, while the other was the son of a somewhat less prominent family and was named Vijaya. Both of them saw the Buddha whose appearance is very pleasing, his body adorned with the thirty-two marks of the Great Man. And young Jaya, thinking to himself "I will give him some ground meal," threw a handful of dirt into the Buddha's begging bowl. Vijaya approved of this by making an añjali.... After presenting this offering to the Blessed One, Jaya then proceeded to make the following resolute wish: "By this root of good merit, I would become king, and, after placing the earth under a single umbrella of sovereignty, I would pay homage to the Blessed Buddha."[17]

The text then goes on to make clear the identification between Jaya and King Aśoka and also between his friend Vijaya and Aśoka's subsequent prime minister Rādhagupta.

How are we to interpret the differences between the two versions of this story? In the one, the offering that is made is of honey needed for a sick pratyekabuddha. In the other, the gift is of dirt, an impure substance, unneeded and perhaps unwanted by the Buddha. In the one, the giver is accompanied by a woman who is to become his queen and by his two brothers. In the other, the boy is joined by his companion who is to become his prime minister.

It is important to remember that the two texts in which these two versions of the story appear — the *Mahāvaṃsa* and

the *Aśokāvadāna* are rather different kinds of literary creations and were written under very different circumstances. Simply put, the *Mahāvaṃsa* is a chronicle *(yaṃsa)* of the island of Sri Lanka written by a monk (Mahānāma) in the 5th century under the close sponsorship, if not supervision, of a Sinahalese king. Among other things, it aims at glorifying Sri Lanka and Buddhist kingship, especially king Duṭṭhagāmaṇi, for whom Aśoka forms a sort of legendary model. It is not surprising, then, that Aśoka is described in a generally positive light, not only in this life, but in his previous births as well.[18]

The Sanskrit *Aśokāvadāna,* however, was written in Northwestern India, in a religiously pluralistic setting, at a time (2nd century A.C.) when the king was not particularly inclined towards Buddhism. It has no reason, therefore, to flatter the institution of kingship, but is interested, like other texts of the *avadāna* genre, in illustrating the operations of karma, good or bad. In fact, in North India, Buddhists were keenly aware of two distinct models of kingship: that of the great righteous *cakravartin* (the ideal monarch who rules by Dharma), and that of Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* whose Machiavellian ruler does not hesitate to use *daṇḍa* — punishment or force — to safeguard and retain his powers.[19] It is thus possible to detect in the *Aśokāvadāna* a certain ambiguity towards the figure of Aśoka, who is generally lauded as a *dharmarāja* but who can occasionally fall into acting like a *daṇḍarāja.* Thus, for instance, Aśoka is said to construct a prison for torturing randomly captured victims which came to be known as "Aśoka's hell." Or again he personally beheads five hundred of his ministers for questioning a rather irrational order of his; and he has five hundred of his concubines burned at the stake for teasing him.[20] All of these deeds earn him the epithet *"Caṇḍāśoka" — Aśoka*

the Fierce — an appellation that emphasizes the power-mad side of his nature.

Scholars, noting these stories, have generally argued that they are intended to emphasize the fierce and impetuous temperament of Aśoka *before* his conversion to Buddhism, and so to magnify the greatness of his change of heart. In fact, however, even *after* he converts and comes to be known as "Dharmāśoka" — Aśoka the Righteous — we find that this side of his nature persists. Thus, immediately after his conversion experience, when one would expect him to be highly motivated by his newfound faith and its doctrine of non-violence, Aśoka shows no mercy towards Caṇḍagirika, the man he had employed as executioner-in-chief, and has him slowly tortured to death in his own prison. Still later, he flies into a rage and orders the massacre of 18,000 heretics for the misdeed of one of them; and then again he launches a veritable pogrom against the Jains, setting a bounty on the head of any heretic, a proclamation that results in the decapitation of his own brother, the arhat prince Vītāśoka.[21]

All of this is summed up, perhaps, in the fact that in the *Aśokāvadāna* Aśoka is said to be physically ugly, to have rough skin, and to be disliked by his father and the women of his harem.[22] Significantly, the text attributes this ugliness and harshness specifically to the dubious nature of Aśoka's act of merit in a past life — to his gift of *dirt*. Thus later, when Aśoka meets the Elder Upagupta and notices that the Elder's skin is soft and smooth while his own is coarse, rough, and unpleasant to the touch, Upagupta does not mince words in explaining the karmic reasons for this: "That is because the gift I gave to that peerless person (the Buddha) was very pure and pleasing; I did not offer the Tathagata a gift of dirt like you!"[23]

This is not to say that Aśoka in the *Aśokāvadāna* is not also viewed positively. Indeed, one thrust of the text is to show in what ways this same act of merit — his offering of dirt to the Buddha — resulted in his *dharmarāja*-like kingship. But the overall perspective on his kingship remains one of ambiguity, exalting his righteousness at times, but ever wary of his power potential.[24]

The *Mahdvatsa* too retains some traces of this double-sidedness of Aśoka, but to a much lesser degree.[25] Generally speaking, its attitude towards Aśoka is unambiguously positive, and the few times it seems to undermine his glory it does so, as we shall see, not out of a wariness about the institution of kingship but out of a desire to glorify more greatly a Sri Lankan monarch by comparison. Suffice it to say, then, that the *Mahāvaṃsa* views Aśoka's kingship positively, while the *Aśokāvadāna* views it ambiguously, and that one of the ways this difference is expressed is in the different offerings — honey and dirt — made by Aśoka in his past life.

The same variance can also be seen in the differences in the persons who, in each story, seek to share in Aśoka's meritorious act. In the North Indian text, it is Aśoka's future prime minister, Rādhagupta, who seconds his gift of dirt. This is significant, for in the Aśoka legend, it is the king's ministers who are generally portrayed as the prime advocates of *realpolitik,* the ones who consistently emphasize Kautilyan policies. Thus, in the *Aśokāvadāna,* it is Rādhagupta who schemes to destroy Aśoka's rivals to the throne and enables him to usurp the kingship.[26] Elsewhere, in the same text, it is his minister Yasas who objects to Aśoka's prostrating himself publicly in front of Buddhist monks because some of them may be low caste individuals and he fears this would demean the royal dignity.[27] And, at

the end of Aśoka's life, it is once again his ministers, this time as a group, who restrain him from making gifts to the monks when these threaten to deplete the state funds, arguing that "the power of kings lies in their state treasury."[28] As a minister, then Rādhagupta's association with Aśoka in his gift of dirt serves to emphasize the power-conscious Kautilyan aspect of his kingship.

In the *Mahāvaṃsa's* gift of honey, however, Aśoka is associated not with a future minister but with a future monk (Nigrodha), a future king of Sri Lanka (Devānampiya Tissa), and his own future queen (Asaṃdhimittā). Each of these karmic companions serves in his or her own way to reinforce the text's positive image of Aśoka. The association with Nigrodha — the charismatic and enlightened novice who is to bring about Aśoka's conversion — looks forward to his close and devoted relationship to the Buddhist Saṅgha as a whole. The connection with the future Devānampiya Tissa, his Sri Lankan namesake, hints at his later intimacy with Sri Lanka, while the karmic tie with Asaṃdhimittā, whom the Pali tradition consistently portrays as a perfect wife, reinforces Aśoka's own claim to be a perfect king: a gem of a queen for a gem of a ruler.

By way of contrast, it might be added here, Asaṃdhimittā does not figure at all in the *Aśokāvadāna.* Instead, there, place is given to the wicked Tiṣyarakṣitā, who turns out to be as evil as Asaṃdhimittā is meritorious.[29] Through her malignant conniving, Tiṣyarakṣitā manages to obtain from Aśoka a boon: he grants her his kingship for a period of seven days. Then, in possession of his royal seal, she secretly uses her new-found authority to order the torture and blinding of Aśoka's virtuous son Kuṇāla, who had previously angered her by refusing her incestuous sexual advances.[30] In the story, however, her cruel

ways serve to beget more cruelty, for when Aśoka eventually finds out what she has done, his punishment of her is hardly exemplary either; despite repeated pleas for clemency on the part of Kuṇāla, the one who was offended, and despite the fact that Kuṇāla, by an act of truth, miraculously regains his eyesight, Aśoka still has Tiṣyarakṣitā executed after threatening, in his own words, to "tear out her eyes, rip open her body with sharp rakes, impale her alive on a spit, cut off her nose with a saw, cut out her tongue with a razor."[31] The cruel queen here, then, merely stimulates the cruel side of the king.

2. The Fate of the Bodhi Tree

Mention of Tiṣyarakṣitā raises a second point of contrast between the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Mahāvaṃsa;* for in both texts the story is told of Tiṣyarakṣitā's (Pali: Tissarakkhā's) use of black magic against the Bodhi Tree at Bodhgaya. She is jealous of the favours and attentions that Aśoka is extending to the tree and resolves to take action against it, mistakenly believing the "Bodhi" referred to by the king to be a new rival mistress. The tale is most vivid in the *Aśokāvadāna:*

> Now Aśoka's chief queen was named Tiṣyarakṣitā, and she thought: "Although the king pursues his pleasure with me, he sends all the best jewels to Bodhi's place!" She therefore asked a Mātanga woman to bring about the destruction of "Bodhi, her rival." The sorceress said she would do it, but first demanded some money. When she had been paid, she muttered some mantras and tied a thread around the Bodhi Tree; soon it began to wither.
>
> The king's men quickly informed Aśoka of this fact. "Your majesty," one of them said, "the Bodhi Tree is drying up."…
>
> The news made Aśoka collapse on the ground in a faint. His attendants splashed some water in his face, and when he had

somewhat regained consciousness, he said, sobbing: "When I looked at the king of trees, I knew that even now I was looking at the Self-existent Master. If the tree of the Lord comes to die, I too shall surely expire!"

Now Tiṣyarakṣitā saw the king afflicted with sorrow and said: "My Lord, if Bodhi should happen to die, I will bring about your pleasure!"

"Bodhi is not a woman," said the king, "but a tree; it is where the Blessed One attained complete unsurpassed enlightenment."

Tiṣyarakṣitā now realized her mistake. She summoned the Mātanga woman and asked whether it was possible to restore the Bodhi Tree to its previous healthy condition.

"If there is still some life left in it," said the sorceress, "I shall be able to revive it." She then untied the thread, dug up the ground all around the tree, and watered it with a thousand pitchers of milk a day. After some time, it grew to be as it was before. The king's men quickly told Aśoka: "Rejoice, your majesty, the tree has returned to its previous state!"[32]

Much the same episode is referred to in the *Mahāvaṃsa* with, however, a rather different denouement. For in the Sri Lankan tradition, Tissarakkhā *is successful* in her attempt to destroy 'the Bodhi Tree at Bodhgaya; it perishes soon after she pierces it with a *maṇḍu* thorn.[33]

Some scholars have interpreted this Sri Lankan story as recalling the actual death of the Bodhi Tree at Bodhgaya. Whether or not this be the case, it is important to note that in the *Mahāvaṃsa* this episode occurs right after the chapter describing the glorious transference and successful transplanting of the southern branch of that Bodhi Tree to Sri Lanka. The implication of the story is thus clear: what has died in India still thrives at Anuradhapura; Sri Lanka is now in sole possession of the living Tree of Enlightenment.

There is in this a kind of Sinhalese one-upsmanship that is not at all uncommon in the *Mahāvaṃsa* and that is quite willing to exalt the glories of Sri Lankan Buddhism even at the expense of Buddhism in India, its place of origin.

The two traditions thus use the same tale for two very different purposes. In the *Aśokāvadāna,* Tiṣyarakṣitā is not successful in destroying the Bodhi Tree, but what saves it is not so much the failure of her magic as the devoted care and concern — the Bodhipūjā — of Aśoka himself. The text thus serves to emphasize and glorify Aśoka's own faith and devotion. In the *Mahāvaṃsa,* however, this feature is totally passed over, and instead what is stressed is the glory of Sri Lanka as the new and chief preserve of the Buddhist religion.

3. The Gathering of the Relics

Much the same contrast may be found in the two texts' versions of another tale: Aśoka's gathering of the Buddha's relics for distribution into the 84,000 stūpas he plans to build. Both the Sanskrit and the Pali traditions start the story in more or less the same way:

After the *parinirvāṇa* and cremation of the Buddha, his relics were divided into eight shares, one for each of the eight kings of that time. Each of these monarchs then built a stūpa over his portion of the relics; these were called the "droṇa stūpas" because the division of the relics had been made by a brahmin named Droṇa and because each one of these enshrined one *droṇa* (bucketful) of relics. One of these droṇa stūpas was located at the town of Rāmagrāma; not long thereafter it was flooded by the waters of the Ganges and the relics there were swept away and sank down to the underwater palace of the nāga king. Years later, when Aśoka set out to collect all the

relics of the Buddha for redistribution and re-enshrining in his 84,000 stūpas, he encountered no difficulty at all in gathering the shares from the first seven droṇa stūpas, but then he arrived at the nāga king's palace at Rāmagrāma.[34]

Here, the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Mahāvaṃsa* once again diverge. In the *Aśokāvadāna*, the nāgas inform Aśoka that they want to go on worshipping their share of the relics and so refuse to hand it over to him. Aśoka, realizing that he cannot outmatch the nāgas in their devotion and offerings, agrees to this and departs empty-handed. As a verse in the text puts it:

> Today at Rāmagrāma the eighth stūpa stands
> for in those days the nāgas guarded it with devotion.
> The king did not take the relics from there
> but left them alone, and, full of faith, withdrew.[35]

In the *Mahāvaṃsa,* on the other hand, a rather different scenario emerges. Aśoka still comes away from Rāmagrāma (Pali: Rāmagāma) empty-handed, but for a very different reason. He is reminded by the monks that this eighth share of relics had been set aside by the Buddha for enshrinement by King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi of Sri Lanka, and, not wishing to violate the Blessed One's decree, he leaves them alone. The text is quite explicit about this:

> Lying on his deathbed the Master of the world spoke thus to Sakka, the king of the gods, so that with his relics he might bring to pass salvation for the world: "O king of the gods, of the eight doṇas of my bodily relics, one doṇa, adored in Rāmagāma, shall be borne thence into the kingdom of the nāgas, where it will be adored until it shall come to be enshrined in the Great Thūpa of the island of Lanka."
>
> Then the far-seeing and most wise Thera Mahākassapa, mindful of the coming division of the relics by King Aśoka, had a great and well-guarded treasure of relics placed near Rājagaha,

> and King Ajātasattu brought there the seven doṇas of relics; but the doṇa in Rāmagāma he did not take, knowing the Master's intention. When King Aśoka saw the great treasure of relics he thought also to have the eighth doṇa brought. But, knowing that it was destined by the Conqueror to be enshrined in the Great Thūpa in Sri Lanka, the ascetics of that time prevented Aśoka from doing this.[36]

The *Mahāvaṃsa* then goes on to relate how much later the Sri Lankan Elder Soṇuttara, on Duṭṭhagāmaṇi's behalf, descends to the nāga palace where he asks the nāga king for the relics. His attitude is rather different than Aśoka's: "The relics that are here in thy hands," he declares, "are appointed by the Buddha to be enshrined in the Great Thūpa… give them to me!" But the nāga king is not about to do so. He signals to his nephew, a monstrous nāga three hundred yojanas long, to take the relics and hide them, which he does by swallowing them, casket and all. In the meantime, he tries to divert Soṇuttara's attention by arguing that all the jewels in Sri Lanka could not possibly measure up to the gems which adorn and honour the caitya of the relics in the nāga kingdom, and therefore he should not "take the relics from a place of high honour to a place of lesser honour." But Soṇuttara is not to be deterred. Telling the nāga king that "there is no understanding of the Dhamma in thy kingdom," he uses his supernatural powers to magically stretch out his arm; and reaching right down into the belly of the nāga king's nephew he takes the relics and flees with them back to Sri Lanka.[37]

The difference between these two accounts, then, is clear: in the *Aśokāvadāna,* the stress once again is on the value of devotion to the relics, whether it be the devotion of Aśoka or of the nāgas. In the *Mahāvaṃsa,* the emphasis is once more on

the glory of Sri Lanka and on its possession of some genuine Buddha relics. Soṇuttara, a Sri Lankan monk, is shown to outwit and be more powerful than the king of the nāgas, and Duṭṭhagāmaṇi, a Sri Lankan king, is shown to have succeeded where Aśoka had failed.

4. The 84,000 Stūpas or Vihāras

Despite this failure to gather *all* the relics of the Buddha, Aśoka proceeds, at least in the *Aśokāvadāna,* to redistribute and re-enshrine those that he has collected into 84,000 stūpas which he has built throughout the whole of Jambudvīpa. This was to become Aśoka's most famous legendary act, and, for centuries, pilgrims visiting the holy sites of India habitually ascribed almost every ancient stūpa they came across to Aśoka. The *Aśokāvadāna* version of the episode is as follows:

> Then Aśoka had eighty-four thousand boxes made of gold, silver, cat's eye, and crystal, and in them were placed the relics. Also eighty-four thousand urns and eighty-four thousand inscription plates were prepared. All of this was given to the yakṣas for distribution in the eighty-four thousand stūpas he ordered built throughout the earth as far as the surrounding ocean, in the small, great, and middle-sized towns, wherever there was a population of one hundred thousand persons…. Aśoka then went to the Kukkuṭārāma Monastery and spoke to the Elder Yasas: "This is my wish; I would like to complete the building of all eighty-four thousand stūpas on the same day, at the same time."
>
> "Very well," replied the Elder, "when the moment comes, I shall signal it by hiding the orb of the sun with my hand." Then, not long thereafter, he eclipsed the sun with his hand, and all at once the eighty-four thousand stūpas were completed."

This relation corresponds to the similar account, in the *Mahāvaṃsa,* of Aśoka's construction of 84,000 monasteries (vihāras):

> When he heard: "There are eighty-four thousand sections of the Dhamma," the king said: "Each one of them I will honour with a vihāra." Then, bestowing ninety-six koṭis of money in eighty-four thousand towns, the ruler bade the kings all over the earth to begin to build vihāras, and he himself began to build the Asokārāma….
>
> All those beautiful vihāras then begun they duly finished in all the cities within three years; and, by the miraculous power of the Thera Indagutta, who watched over the work, the ārāma named after Aśoka was likewise quickly brought to completion…. On every side, from the eighty-four thousand cities came letters on one day with the news: "The vihāras are completed."[39]

There are numerous parallels between these two versions of the story. For example, in both texts, all the stūpas (vihāras) are completed on the same day, and this completion then signals the occasion for a great festival of merit-making. Moreover, both construction projects are supervised by a monk with magical powers (Indagutta in the Pali tradition, Yasas in the Sanskrit). Both are symbolic of the spread and establishment of Buddhism throughout Aśoka's empire, and both mark an official change in Aśoka's status: up until this time, he had been known as Caṇḍāśoka; thenceforth he is to be known as Dharmāśoka.

But there are some noteworthy differences between these two accounts as well, and these are worth exploring here. First, and not be minimized, is the difference between stūpas and vihāras. In the *Aśokāvadāna,* Aśoka's concern is with honouring the remains of the Buddha's physical body — his relics — and the construction of commemorative markers (stūpas) over those. In the *Mahāvaṃsa,* no mention is made of the relics in this context. Instead, Aśoka seeks to honour the Saṅgha by building not stūpas but monasteries (vihāras) for monks.

Secondly, related to this are the different accounts of what inspires Aśoka to build *eighty-four thousand* stūpas or vihāras. The number 84,000 is, of course, symbolic of totality in the Buddhist tradition, but its specific connotations here should not be overlooked. In the *Mahāvaṃsa,* we are told that Aśoka decides to undertake the vihāra construction project when he learns from Moggaliputta Tissa that there are 84,000 sections of the Buddha's Dhamma — his Teaching. The vihāras are thus not just for the Saṅgha, but also symbolic of the Dhamma; they represent, so to speak, the Buddha's *dhammakaya* — the corpus of his Teaching. The 84,000 stūpas, on the other hand, do not directly symbolize the Dharma but are commemorative of the 84,000 atoms that traditionally were thought to make up a human body.[40] They represent, therefore, the Buddha's *rūpakāya* — his physical form.

This distinction, I would suggest, is reflective of a larger difference in orientation of the two texts. Simply put, where the *Mahāvaṃsa* seems concerned with what might be called the "dharmalogical" dimension of Buddhism, the *Aśokāvadāna* is interested in what might be termed the "rūpalogical." In other words, the one is preoccupied with the purity of the Teaching of the Buddha and its preservation; the other is intrigued by the *person* of the Buddha and his veneration.

This, of course, is too gross a generalization for it to hold unequivocally, for an entire tradition, but it might be useful to give one more graphic and not altogether unconnected example of it here. The *Aśokāvadāna,* as has been mentioned, highlights the role of the Elder Upagupta as Aśoka's chief monastic counterpart rather than that of Moggaliputta Tissa. One of the most famous stories about Upagupta in the *Aśokāvadāna* is that of his taming of Māra, the Evil One of Buddhism. During his life-

time, it is claimed, the Buddha merely chased Māra away, at Bodhgaya and elsewhere, but he never actually converted him to Buddhism. This task was left to the Elder Upagupta who, through various clever means, binds Māra and then makes him come to realize the great compassion of the Buddha and to take refuge in the Triple Gem.[41] In one version of the story, in fact, Māra even goes so far as to make a vow for future Buddhahood.[41]

This notion that Māra might actually become a faithful devotee of the Buddha is interesting for its proto-Mahāyānist view of the potential Buddhahood of all living beings, but the story goes on to emphasize other things. Having converted Māra to the Buddhist path, Upagupta decides to ask him to use his magical powers to make manifest for him, here and now, the physical form of the departed Buddha. Significantly, he couches this request in terms of the two dimensions of Buddhist concern we have just identified. "You yourself know," he declares to Māra, "that I was initiated into the monastic life one hundred years after the Blessed One entered *parinirvāṇa;* therefore, though I have already seen the Dharma-body, I have not yet seen the physical body *(rūpakāya)* of the Lord of the Triple World…. I want you to make manifest here the physical form of the Buddha… for I am eager to see the body of the Dasabala."[43] Mara, agreeing to his request, then displays for him the form of the Tathāgata, and Upagupta, seeing it in all its magnificence, endowed with thirty-two marks of the Great Man, is carried away by emotion and devotion and ends up bowing down before it. Mara objects to this, telling him not to commit idolatry, but Upagupta justifies his action, claiming that he is not prostrating himself in front of Mara but in front of the Buddha-in-Māra.[44]

It is clear, then, that this is a text in which the notion of *bhakti* — devotion to the Buddha's physical form, his *rūpa,* and not just to his enlightened Teaching, his Dharma — plays an important role.

Nothing comparable is found in the story of Moggaliputta Tissa, who seems rather preoccupied with maintaining the purity of the Saṅgha. But a somewhat similar episode does occur in the *Mahāvaṃsa's* account of Aśoka and the nāga king Mahākala. Mahākala, who had personally seen four Buddhas and who, like Mara, has the magical power needed to take on their form, is brought to Aśoka bound with a golden chain. Aśoka, like Upagupta, then asks him to display the bodily form of the Blessed One. The nāga does so, creating by means of his magical power a Buddha-image complete with the thirty-two major and eighty minor signs of the Great Man. Aśoka's reaction to this sight is rather interesting: he is filled with joy and amazement, but he does not become carried away like Upagupta into thinking that what he is seeing is the actual Buddha in front of him. Instead, he reflects: "If the image created by Mahākala is such as this, the real form of the Buddha must have been something even more extraordinary."[45]

This would appear to be a very Theravādin reaction, one which admires the form of the Buddha and is willing to recall it, but which follows orthodox teaching in recognizing that the Buddha's body is, in fact, no more, that like all constructs it is subject to impermanence. In the *Mahāvaṃsa,* then, unlike in the *Aśokāvadāna,* there is a real reticence in giving full vent to the emotions of Buddha-*bhakti,* and a firm allegiance instead is paid to the Dharma as interpreted by the Theravādin orthodoxy of Sri Lanka.

B. Later Developments

We have looked so far at a number of differences between the *Mahāvaṃsa* and the *Aśokāvadāna* versions of the Aśoka legend and seen several factors operating in these two texts and affecting the way in which they present the story. On the one hand, different attitudes towards kingship have caused different renditions of Aśoka's acts of merit in a past life. On the other hand, the *Mahāvaṃsa's* concern with exalting Sri Lanka, its Buddhism and its royalty, has brought about a difference in accounts of the Bodhi Tree and the relics. Finally, a difference in interest in the "rūpalogical" and the "dharmalogical" dimensions has led to differences in details in the story of the eighty-four thousand stūpas or vihāras.

A similar analysis, with different conclusions as to details perhaps, could no doubt be made of other contemporary renditions of the Aśoka legend, such as those found in the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *A-yü wang chuan.* What I would rather do here, however, is look at somewhat later traditions. Obviously, the stories we have examined thus far did not cease developing with the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Mahāvaṃsa;* they continued to be reworked in subsequent Buddhist literature in Sri Lanka and in India, as well as in Southeast Asia, Tibet and China. In the second part of this paper, therefore, we will need to examine in detail some of these later stages of the tradition and see what more they can tell us about the ongoing and evolving image of Aśoka.

1. The Gift of Dirt Reconsidered

We emphasized, in our initial discussion of Aśoka's gift of dirt, the negative connotations of this ambiguous act, and showed

how in the *Aśokāvadāna* these were connected to the harsh, rough, Kautilyan sides of his kingship. Not all the texts that subsequently recounted this story, however, were willing to accept this. In fact, in time, there seems to have been a tendency to de-emphasize the negative implications of Aśoka's gift of dirt, without, however, altogether getting rid of the story.

Some sources, Kumāralāta's *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* for example, chose to place the tale in a new light by stressing not the impure nature of Aśoka's gift (dirt), but the purity of intent with which it was given. Similarly, Āryaśūra, whose somewhat later *Jātakamālā* is difficult to date precisely, could declare with clear reference to our legend: "Even a gift of dirt made by people of childlike minds is a good gift."[47] The much later *Mahākarmavibhanga,* finding it incredible that Aśoka's gift of dirt could have led him to the throne of a *cakravartin,* seeks to explain this karma by emphasizing the greatness of the Buddha as a field of merit.[48]

A somewhat different tack is taken in a late Chinese life of the Buddha, Pao Ch'eng's *Shih chia ju lai ying hua lu:* it relates the story of Aśoka's gift of dirt, even illustrating it with a woodcut, and then asks: "Is it possible that the offering of a little dust could result in the glory of the great Aśoka?" And significantly, it answers this in the negative: "No, another prior act of merit will result in that glory," and it then goes on to relate a different story of Aśoka as a king in a past life who made a vast number of statues of the Tathāgata at the time of the previous Buddha Puṣya.[49] In other words, here, the gift of dirt is specifically dissociated from Aśoka's later greatness, and another more karmically acceptable (and more laudatory) story has been inserted to explain it.[50]

A similar example can be found in the Pali tradition in

the fairly late (14th century?) *Dasavatthuppakaraṇa.* To my knowledge, this much-neglected collection of Buddhist tales is the only text that has actually combined both the Sanskrit story of the gift of dirt and the Pali story of the gift of honey. Much like the *Mahāvaṃsa,* it tells the tale of the merchant's gift of honey to the pratyekabuddha, which it portrays as taking place long, long ago prior to the time of the Buddha Gotama. It adds an interesting detail to the story, however. In the *Mahāvaṃsa* version, the honey merchant makes his wish for kingship and for sovereignty reaching one yojana up into the air (to include the realm of the yakṣas) and one yojana under the earth (to include the realm of the nāgas), and what inspires him to desire this is the sight of the honey spilling out of the pratyekabuddha's bowl.[51] Scholars have always had a little difficulty understanding the exact significance of this overflow and its relationship, to the merchant's vow. Paul Mus, for example, comparing honey to the Vedic *soma,* makes the rather tortuous argument that "by filling the bowl with honey to the point of overflowing, the merchant is making an offering of all things in their essence."[52] The *Dasavatthuppakaraṇa,* however, presents the story in a different, more understandable way: this time the honey does not overflow; instead the merchant is said to see bubbles in the honey arising from the bottom of the bowl and coming to the top. The bubbles at the bottom make him wish to be king with authority extending one yojana downwards, and the bubbles at the top make him wish to extend his authority one yojana upwards.[53] Here, then, we have a clear case of the merchant's gift being rewritten in an effort to make better sense of the vow taken by Aśoka.

The *Dasavatthuppakaraṇa,* however, does not stop there. Soon after his gift of honey, the merchant passes away and is

reborn as a god in one of the heavens. Then, after some time there, he dies and is reborn as a young boy playing in the dust of the road in Rājagṛha at the time of the Buddha. And here the text relates the episode of the gift of dirt much as it is found in the Sanskrit tradition, except without the negative implications. Indeed, this time the dirt is put to a practical use: the Buddha asks Ananda to mix it with water and make a sort of plaster out of it to use to repair some cracks in the monastery walls.[54] In time, then, it may be said that Aśoka's gift of dirt, though still recalled, came to be reinterpreted and placed in a more positive light than it had previously held.

2. The Legends of the Queens

A rather similar tendency may be found in the later Sanskrit and Pali treatments of the legends of Aśoka's two queens, Tiṣyarakṣitā and Asaṃdhimittā. We have seen how, in the *Aśokāvadāna*, the evil-minded Tiṣyarakṣitā not only threatens the life of the Bodhi Tree but also brings out the negative side of Aśoka's character; for, despite the pleas of Kuṇāla, he remains full of wrath at the blinding of his son and is unforgiving: he threatens Tiṣyarakṣitā with tortures and has her put to death by burning her alive in a lacquer house.[55] There could hardly be a more graphic instance of his "harshness."

Later versions of the story, however, sought to mollify this image. Thus in Kṣemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā* (11th century), which recounts this tale, Aśoka is calmed by the miraculous restoration of Kuṇāla's sight and, full of kindness and compassion, he forgives the guilty Tiṣyarakṣitā.[56] This not only makes the story more consistent, but it serves also to improve Aśoka's image. As Bongard-Levin and Volkova put it: "The

interpretation of Kṣemendra seems to be of later origin and can be explained, evidently, by his desire to portray Aśoka as an ideal Buddhist king noted for his kindness and patience and capable of controlling his terrible wrath."[57]

Developments in the tale of Asaṃdhimittā in the Pali tradition are a bit more complicated, however, and involve new additions to her legend. As we have seen, the *Mahāvaṃsa* (at least as it was edited by Mahānāma in the fifth century) does not provide much information about her. Later Pali traditions, however, were to go on and expand her story. Thus in three texts, the already mentioned *Dasavatthuppakaraṇa,* the so-called Cambodian or *Extended Mahāvaṃsa* (9th–10th centuries?), and the 15th century Thai cosmological text, the *Trai Bhūmi Kathā,* we find her tale more fully developed and her merits magnified. These sources, too, do not hesitate in reworking the story of the gift of honey, for they now add to the *Mahāvaṃsa* account an accessory gift of a piece of cloth made by Asaṃdhimittā to the same pratyekabuddha. They then relate a long tale that may be summarized as follows:

One day, King Aśoka, whose tremendous merits resulted in his being daily provided with all sorts of luxuries and foodstuffs by the gods, saw Asaṃdhimittā enjoying a heavenly piece of sugarcane, and jokingly he mocked her for consuming what she had not karmically earned. His teasing upset her; she felt that he thought that she had no merit of her own, and, in a pout, she replied that everything she enjoyed was due to her own good merits. Now it was time for Aśoka to get upset. "Oh, is that so?" he replied, and he demanded, as a test of her merit, that she procure him sixty thousand monastic robes by the next day for an offering to the community of monks. Now Asaṃdhimittā did not know what to do. But, in the middle of

the night, the guardian gods came to her and told her to fear nothing, for in a past life she had made an offering of cloth to a pratyekabuddha and her resulting merit was great indeed. And sure enough, the next day, miraculously (or rather karmically) she had no difficulty in procurring the sixty thousand sets of robes when needed.

Aśoka is tremendously impressed by this and makes Asaṃdhimittā his favorite queen, going so far as to offer her his own sovereighty. She refuses this privilege, but the favouritism it reflects occasions the jealousy and ill will of Aśoka's sixteen thousand other wives, all members of his harem. In order to silence these jealous concubines, Aśoka orders another test of Asaṃdhimittā's merit. He has sixteen thousand identical cakes baked, one of them containing his royal seal. He then asks all of his wives, including Asaṃdhimittā, to choose a piece of cake and to break it in two. They all do so, Asaṃdhimittā getting the last piece left, but such is her worthiness that that is the one that contains the royal seal. Aśoka then proclaims to all the great merits of his queen, chiding the other wives for their jealous spite.[58]

Clearly these two stories, fairy tales almost, are designed to glorify and enhance the figure of Aśoka's wife, and, through her, of Aśoka himself. For even though it is not true in ancient India that the woman makes the man, it is true that the qualities of the queen directly reflect on those of the king. Thus one of the seven signs of the great *cakravartin* monarch is the perfectly beautiful and meritorious queen.

But Asaṃdhimittā's merit is operative on Aśoka in more direct ways than that. Thus, in the *Trai Bhūmi Kathā,* it is she who encourages her husband to turn himself towards Buddhism by listening to the Dharma, observing the precepts, and by under-

taking the construction of 84,000 stūpas *and* 84,000 vihāras. In other words, having impressed Aśoka, she then becomes the one responsible for making him a dharmic king.[59]

Another interesting point about these stories glorifying Asaṃdhimittā, however, is that the second one of them does so by reinterpreting positively a tale which, in the Sanskrit tradition, was told about the evil queen Tiṣyarakṣitā. Indeed, Asaṃdhimittā's being offered the kingship and her obtaining the king's seal can be seen as a reworking of the *Aśokāvadāna* story of Tiṣyarakṣitā being offered the kingship for seven days and her obtaining, by means of her conniving, the king's seal. The difference lies in the fact that where Tiṣyarakṣitā uses her temporary sovereignty and the seal to order the blinding of Aśoka's son Kuṇāla, Asaṃdhimittā is said specifically to refrain from using her granted sovereignty and to continue dutifully to obey and serve her husband.[60]

3. The Collection of Relics: A New Story

The overall magnification and positivization of Aśoka as time went on is also reflected in the development of the legend of his gathering the relics of the Buddha from the abode of the naga kings. In the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Mahāvaṃsa,* as we have seen, Aśoka fails to obtain the relics from the underwater palace, leaving them in the one instance to the nāgas and in the other to Soṇuttara and Duṭṭhagāmaṇi. But with the increasing magnification of Aśoka as a model of kingship, and with the increasing symbolic significance of his distribution of all the relics of the Buddha — his whole body — throughout Jambudvīpa, such a presentation of the story was no longer really satisfactory. It would hardly do to have the great world

monarch bested by a nāga, nor, outside of Sri Lanka at least, would it be all right for him to be outdone by Duṭṭhagāmaṇi. Some other solution had to be found. Several were.

The Chinese translation of the Sanskrit *Saṃyuktāgama* (Pali: Saṃyutta Nikāya), for instance, tells exactly the same story of Aśoka's attempts to get the relics from the nāgas as the *Aśokāvadāna* except that he is successful and does not go away empty-handed.[61] Moreover, there exists another rather different tradition about Aśoka in which he is also successful in obtaining the relics from the nāga king. This is preserved in a bewilderingly wide variety of texts such as Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Dīgha Nikāya, the *Sumangalavilāsinī;* the last section of the *A-yü wang chuan* (a Chinese collection of miscellaneous Aśoka stories); the 12th century Burmese Pali cosmology, the *Lokapaññatti;* the 13th century chronicle of the Great Stūpa of Sri Lanka, the *Thūpavaṃsa;* and the 16th century Tibetan history of Buddhism, Tāranātha's *Chos ḥbyung.*[62]

In these sources, we are told that king Ajātaśatru long ago had deposited all the Buddha relics in the Ganges where they were guarded by a huge revolving water wheel on which wooden figures armed with sharp swords spun around and effectively prevented anyone from passing. Aśoka, however, manages to stop the wheel from turning although the way in which he does this differs from text to text. Variously, he diverts the course of the river to keep the wheel from spinning (Tāranātha); he throws prunes into the water to block the mechanism *(A-yü wang chuan);* he calls on Viśvakarman, the divine artificer, to disarm the wooden figures holding the words *(Thūpavaṃsa, Sumangalavilāsinī);* and he recruits the son of the magician-engineer from the "Land of Roma" who made the figures in the first place *(Lokapaññatti).*

Having passed this first checkpoint, however, Aśoka then encounters a nāga king who further bars his way. Not knowing how to proceed, he turns to a monk for advice. The monk tells him that he will be successful in getting the relics only if his merit is greater than that of the nāga. Their relative merit is then calculated as follows: two statues *(rūpa)* of identical size are made — one of Aśoka and one of the nāga — and are then weighed. The implication is that he whose statue is the heaviest will be the one who has the most merit. At first, the nāga's, statue weighs twice as much as that of Aśoka. Aśoka then hastens to acquire more merit, and gradually his statue gets heavier and heavier until finally it outweighs that of his adversary and he is able to pass and take away the relics.[63]

The implications of this story need hardly be spelled out. Here Aśoka clearly overcomes the comparative weaknesses which he exhibited in the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Mahāvaṃsa* and which led to his failure to obtain the Buddha-relics. This time, there is no stopping him. Indeed, in seemingly direct contradiction to the *Mahāvaṃsa,* the *Thūpavaṃsa* would have us believe that his success was foretold long ago, for, in its account of the story, Aśoka is said to find in the relic chamber a golden plaque that reads: "In the future, a prince named… Aśoka will take these relics and have them widely dispersed."[64]

4. The 84,000 Stūpas Once More

This dispersal of the relics that the *Thūpavaṃsa* refers to is, of course, none other than the construction of the 84,000 stūpas which we examined earlier. This Aśoka-legend too was subject to evolution in the later tradition. As mentioned, it was to become Aśoka's most famous act, and Buddhist rulers as far

as Japan were inspired to emulate it.[65] Even today, it remains a model for certain rituals in Southeast Asia.[66]

But nowhere was this episode developed quite as spectacularly as in the *Lokappaññatti,* written in Burma in the 11th century. Here the festival celebrating the completion of the 84,000 stūpas becomes a sort of model for merit-making festivals in general; in it, Upagupta plays the important role of keeping Māra at bay so that he will not disrupt the proceedings, while Aśoka himself, as king and layman, takes on the role of chief devotee. He prepares magnificent offerings for presentation to the monks and to the stūpas during seven years, seven months, and seven days. But the most spectacular event of this great ceremony, and the one I wish to focus on, is the last, when Aśoka, in a moment of self-sacrifice and devotion, makes an offering of himself to the great stūpa in his capital. The episode has been much neglected in Aśokan studies and is worth translating here:

> On the seventh day, King Aśoka, desirous of paying pūjā to the great stūpa, had his own body wrapped in cotton up to his neck and his limbs up to his wrists, and had himself soaked with five hundred pots of scented oil. Then, standing facing the Mahāstūpa, making añjali, his head anointed with oil, and mindful of the Buddha, he had his body set on fire; and the flames rose up in the air to a height of seven persons. The king kept repeating a stanza in praise of the Buddha: "Namo Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa — Hail to the Blessed One, the arhat, he who is altogether enlightened. For the benefit of many he taught the Dharma which is well spoken, made visible, timely, open to all, leading to Nirvāṇa, to be known by each individual, and well practised by the wise. His is the community of disciples which conducts itself uprightly, properly and correctly."
>
> In this way he recollected the Triple Gem, and, while he was

> so meditating, the flames did not hurt him in the slightest and his body remained as cool as though it had been smeared with sandalwood paste. And thus it was on the second, third, and up to the seventh day; the king payed pūja to the great stūpa with his entire body ablaze. Then he washed and, adorned with all his ornaments, and surrounded by his ministers, he did worship the stūpa, circumambulating it three times. Then he listened to the preaching of the Dharma for seven days and nights, offered food to the community of monks, worshipped it and went off with his entourage.[67]

Several things are remarkable about this rather extraordinary tale which presents Aśoka as a model devotee and hero of Buddha-*bhakti.* First of all, in it, Aśoka manages to achieve by means of devotion (or more precisely by means of the contemplation of the Three Refuges) an ecstatic state which makes possible a supernatural feat akin to those usually achieved by persons far advanced in the practice of meditation. Indeed, the non-burning of the body in flames is a common feature of the supernatural powers sometimes exhibited by arhats.

Secondly, this account of Aśoka's burning recalls also preparations for a cremation, more specifically for the cremation of a *cakravartin* king.[68] The message is a clever one; in his perfection of *bhakti,* Aśoka has here achieved something that he was unable to accomplish during his lifetime: the perfection of kingship — full cakravartinhood.

Finally, the fact that in this, his cremation, Aśoka does not die indicates that in this event he manages to go beyond death. He is, so to speak, reborn in a new state, something that was indicated in the older versions of the story by his name change from Caṇḍāśoka to Dharmāśoka, but which is made more graphic, here.

Conclusion

With this *Lokapaññatti* legend, we come to a logical endpoint in our study of the development of Aśoka's image. It is a development that has taken us from the time of Aśoka himself through to the relatively late layers of the tradition. In the course of it, we have been able to trace what might be called the general idealization of Aśoka from a Buddhist point of view.

In the edicts, Aśoka's relation to Buddhism is, as we have seen, ambiguous; at best he is a sympathetic semi-patron whose concern for Buddhism is but part of a larger interest in the spiritual state of his empire. In the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Mahāvaṃsa,* however, we found the image of a fully Buddhist Aśoka, but one which was skewed by its context and presented differently depending on the different outlooks of its presenters. Finally, in later sources, in South, Southeast and East Asia, we saw some of those special concerns drop and give way to a full magnification of the person of Aśoka as the great and ideal Buddhist king, the model of devotion and *bhakti.*

There is one final image of Aśoka that we have not touched on here but which might, in fact, concern us more than any other. That is the image of Aśoka that has developed among modern scholars and among present-day followers of Buddhism. In our own time, I have heard Aśoka heralded as a champion of Buddhist socialism, as a founder of Indian nationalism, as an advocate of animal rights, as the prophet of pacifism. Likewise he has been lambasted as a hypocrite, a totalitarian Big Brother, a maker of monastic landlordism. To some extent, all of these views may be rooted in the sources we have considered, and it is likely that there is some truth in each of them. But taken together they testify once again to the ongoing development and the ever-changing nature of the image of Aśoka.

Notes

1. N.A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, eds. and trans., *The Edicts of Aśoka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

2. See P.H.L. Eggermont, *The Chronology of the Reign of Aśoka Moriya* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1956).

3. For an example of a Jain treatment of part of the Aśoka legend, see Hermann Jacobi, ed., *Sthavirāvalīcharita* or *Parisishṭaparvan by Hemachandra* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1885) pp. 259–70. For an example of a Manichaean text which views Aśoka (as well as Upagupta and Devadatta) as false prophets, see W.B. Henning, "The Murder of the Magi," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1944, pp. 133–44.

4. For different views on this dispute, see B.G. Gokhale, *Buddhism and Aśoka* (Baroda: Padmaja Pub., 1949), p. 65; Vincent Smith, *Aśoka, the Buddhist Emperor of India* (reprint ed., Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1964), p. 35; V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Mauryan Polity* (Madras: The University of Madras, 1932), pp. 258, 288.

5. See Nikam and McKeon, pp. 37, 66, 69. For the argument that Aśoka's declaration in Rock Edict VIII that, in the tenth year of his reign, "he left for Sambodhi" refers to a pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, see Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *L'Inde aux temps des Mauryas* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1930), pp. 106–108; and, more recently, Robert Lingat, "Encore Ayāya sambodhim: Àpropos de 1' inscription gréco-araméenne d'Aśoka," *Journal asiatique* 255 (1967): 195–98.

6. A.L. Basham, "The Rise of Buddhism in its Historical Context," *Asian Studies* 4 (1966): 405.

7. Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 31.

8. Wilhelm Geiger, trans. *The Mahāvaṃsa or the Great Chronicle of the Island of Ceylon* (reprint ed., Colombo: Goverment Press, 1950), ch. 5; Hermann Oldenberg, ed. and trans., *The Dīpavaṃsa: An Ancient Buddhist Historical Record* (reprint ed., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982), chs. 6–7; N.A. Jayawickrama, ed. and trans., *The Inception of Discipline and the Vinaya Nidāna,* (London: Luzac and Co., 1962), pp. 3755, 165–80.

9. John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Jean Przyluski, *La legende de l'empereur Aśoka* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1923).

10. See Geiger, pp. 26–50, 82.

11. With the possible exception of the story of the conversion of Kashmir by Majjhantika (Sanskrit: Madhyāntika).

12. In later Sanskrit sources and in the reports of the Chinese pilgrim Hsūantsang, there are references to an Elder Mahendra who has been sometimes identified with Mahinda. See Thomas Watters, *On Yung Chwang's Travels in India* (reprint ed., Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, 1961) 2: 93, 230, 234. See also Etienne Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien* (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1958), p. 332.

13. See P.H.L. Eggermont, "New Notes on Aśoka, part III" *Persica* 5 (1970–71): 69–102; and, more recently, idem, "The Emperor Aśoka and the Tiṣyarakṣitā Legend," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 11 (1980): 165–78. See also Etienne Lamotte, "The Buddha, His Teachings and His Sangha, in Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, eds., *The World of Buddhism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 41.

14. Eggermont, *Chronology,* pp. 119, 216; André Bareau, *Les premiers conciles bouddhiques,* Annales du Musée Guimet, vol. 60, (Paris, 1955).

15. Geiger, p. 30, slightly altered.

16. Ibid.

17. Strong, p. 200.

18. See on this ibid, pp. 22–23.

19. See ibid., pp. 42–49.

20. Ibid., pp. 210–13.

21. Ibid., pp. 232–33.

22. Ibid., p. 206. This is in contrast to the *Mahāvaṃsa* (Geiger, p. 27) where he is described as the most splendid, mighty and wondrous of his brothers.

23. Strong, p. 243.

24. This is further reflected in his being assigned, in the North Indian tradition, the status of a *balacakravartin,* i.e. a dharmic king who is nevertheless armed and rules

by dint of his military power. This ambiguity, moreover, may be historically based, for in his edicts Aśoka himself tells us of the terrible destruction he wrought during the conquest of Kalinga, and, despite his renunciation of war thereafter and his advocacy of Dharma, he still makes it clear that he will not hesitate to enforce law and order should he need to.

25. It mentions just in passing Aśoka's slaying of his brothers in gaining the throne, an episode that is much developed in the *Aśokāvadāna*.

26. Strong, p. 210.

27. Ibid., p. 235.

28. Ibid., p. 288. In the *Mahāvaṃsa* (Geiger, p. 46) as well, it might be pointed out, the king's ministers play a similar role, as may be seen in the case of Aśoka's minister who, when told to resolve the dispute that has arisen within the Saṅgha, does so by indiscriminately executing all those theras who refuse to celebrate the Pātimokkha.

29. Tiṣyarakṣitā (Pali: Tissarakkhā) is, of course, not unknown in the Pali tradition. As we shall see, in the *Mahāvaṃsa,* she appears as Aśoka's second queen whom he marries four years after Asaṃdhimittā dies.

30. Strong, pp. 268–75.

31. Ibid., p. 284.

32. Ibid., pp. 257–58.

33. Geiger, p. 33.

34. See the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta in T.W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha,* 3 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1899–1921), 2: 187–91. See also T.W. Rhys Davids, "Aśoka and the Buddha Relics," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,* 1907, pp. 397–410; and Jean Przyluski, "Le partage des reliques du Buddha," *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 4 (1936): 341–67.

35. Strong, p. 219.

36. Geiger, pp. 210–11, slightly altered.

37. Ibid., pp. 212–14.

38. Strong, pp. 219–20, slightly altered.

39. Geiger, pp. 32–33, 41, slightly altered.

40. See James Legge, trans. *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms* (reprinted., New York: Paragon Book Co., 1965), p. 69 n.1. On these early notions of *dharmakāya* and *rupakāya,* see Paul Demieville, "Busshin", in *Hobogirin* (Tokyo: Maison Franco-Japonaise, 1929); Gadgin Nagao, "On the Theory of Buddha-Body (Buddha-kāya)," *Eastern Buddhist* 6 (1973): 25–53. On *dhammakāya* in the Theravāda tradition, see Frank E. Reynolds, "The Several Bodies of the Buddha: Reflections on a Neglected Aspect of Theravāda Tradition," *History of Religions* 16 (1977): 374–89.

41. Strong, pp. 185–97.

42. Charles Duroiselle, "Upagupta et Māra", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extrême-Orient* 4 (1904): 426.

43. Strong, p. 192. Upagupta has already seen the Dharma-body, i.e. understood the Buddha's Teaching with his Dharma-eye, by virtue of his enlightenment.

44. Strong, pp. 195–96.

45. Geiger, pp. 33–34.

46. Edouard Huber, trans., *Aśvaghoṣa Sūtrālaṃkāra* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1908), p. 122.

47. P.L. Vaidya, ed., *Jātakamālā by Āryaśūra* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1959), p. 19.

48. Sylvain Levi, ed. and trans., *Mahākarmavibhanga et Karmavibhangopadeśa* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1932), p. 170.

49. Léon Wieger, ed. and trans., *Les vies chinoises du Bouddha* (reprint ed., Paris: Cathasia, 1951), p. 183.

50. A somewhat similar story may be found in the *Hsien yü ching* except that the king is not identified with Aśoka but with the Buddha himself who in this way accumulated the merit that led to his *deserving* to have so many stūpas built for him. See Stanley Frye, trans., *The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* (Dharmsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1981), pp. 135–36.

51. Geiger, p. 30.

52. Paul Mus, *Barabuḍur,* 2 vols. (Hanoi: Imprimerie d' Extrême-Orient, 1935), 2: 289.

53. Jacqueline ver Eecke, ed. and trans., *Le Dasavatthuppakaraṇa* (Paris: Ecole Francaise d'Extrême-Orient, 1976), p. 50.

54. Ibid., p. 52.

55. Strong, pp. 284–85. This curious method of execution recalls, perhaps, the famous lacquer house built by Duryodhana for the execution of the Pāṇḍavas in the *Mahābhārata.*

56. P. L. Vaidya, ed., *Avadāna-Kalpalatā* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1959), pp. 346–67.

57. G. M. Bongard-Levin and O.F. Volvoka, *The Kunāla Legend and an Unpublished Aśokāvadānamālā Manuscript* (Calcutta: Indian Studies Past and Present, 1965), pp. 3–4.

58. Ver Eecke, pp. 45–54 (text), 50–59 (trans.); Georges Coedes and Charles Archaimbault, trans., *Les trois mondes* (Paris: Ecole Francaise d'Extrême-Orient, 1973), pp. 111–23; G.P. Malalasekera, ed., *Extended Mahāvaṃsa* (Colombo: Royal Asiatic Society, 1937), pp. 74–77. The Asaṃdhimittā episode is one of the few stories in the *Extended Mahāvaṃsa* that is found neither in Mahānāma's *Mahāvaṃsa* nor in the *Mahāvaṃsa-ṭīkā.*

59. Archaimbault and Coedès, p.122. In this the text combines both the Sanskrit (stūpa) and the Pali (vihāra) traditions.

60. Ibid.

61. See Lamotte, *Histoire,* pp. 264–65; Watters 2: 21.

62. T.W. Rhys Davids, E. Carpenter, and William Stede, eds., *The Sumangalavilāsinī* (London: Pali Text Society, 1886–1932), 2: 612–15; Przyluski, *Légende, pp.* 425–26; Eugène Denis, "La Lokapaññatti et la légende birmane d'Aśoka, *Journal asiatique* 264 (1976): 97–116; N.A. Jayawickrama, ed. and trans., *The Chronicle of the Thūpa and the Thūpavaṃsa* (London: Luzac and Co., 1971), pp. 53–54; Tāranātha, *History of Buddhism,* trans., by Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyaya (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1970).

63. See the discussion in Strong, p. 114.

64. Jayawickrama, *Thūpavaṃsa,* p. 54.

65. See Arthur Wright, "The Formation of Sui Ideology 581–604," *Chinese Thought and Institutions,* ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 98–104; Peter H. Lee, *Lives of Eminent Korean Monks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 66; Shundo Tachibana, "Prince Shotoku, King Aśoka of Japan," *Studies on Buddhism in Japan* 4 (1942): 103–109.

66. Pierre-Bernard Lafont, "Le That de Muong-Sing," *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises,* n.s. 32 (1957): 43.

67. Duroiselle, p. 421.

68. See the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta in T.W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Buddhist Suttas* (New York: Dover, 1969). p. 125.

7
Emperor Aśoka's Place in History: A Review of Prevalent Opinions

Ananda W.P. Guruge

1. Introduction

In spite of frequent assertions to the contrary, students of history do engage themselves, as almost a major preoccupation, in the assessment of careers and achievements of prominent historical figures. Even in the most mechanical and matter-of-fact presentation of historical data with rigorous objectivity, an element of subjective assessment is inevitable. The influence which such figures have exerted on events of their lifetime and those of subsequent periods is increasingly becoming the central theme of historical research and study. The requisite analysis of interaction, for this purpose, involves comparison; and comparison, by itself, is the precursor and promoter of evaluation.

No figure in Indian history has been evaluated for his place in history with as much intensity and by as many diverse interest-groups as Emperor Aśoka, the third monarch of the Mauryan Dynasty (c. 273–236 B.C.). This has been done over a period of not less than two thousand years and the conclusions of each evaluation vary, to such an extent as to make him the most enigmatic figure in the history of the Indian subcontinent, if not of the whole world.

The process, which started with the earliest oral traditions of the Theravāda School of Buddhism in India and sub-

sequently carried on in the historical records of the Buddhist Saṅgha of Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Cambodia, has continued to modern times. Although, as will be shown later in this paper, Aśoka has remained in vivid living memory in the minds of every successive generation of Theravāda Buddhists outside India, he was virtually forgotten in the land of his birth and remained for at least a millennium an unknown and unrecalled name until the 1830s.[1] Commencing with the discovery and deciphering of his most impressive lithic records on rocks and pillars and his identification with Aśoka the Righteous (Dhammāsoka) of Sri Lankan Pali literature, Aśoka has become the cynosure of not only scholarly attention but also popular admiration. Since the publication of the first monograph on Aśoka by Vincent A. Smith in 1901, hardly a decade has elapsed without a fresh attempt to evaluate his place in history from a different point of view. Opinions on his career and achievements are indeed numerous.

The purpose of this paper is to review a number of such evaluations with a view to finding answers for three main questions on which a fair amount of disagreement and controversy has come into being. These questions are:

(1) To what extent does the Buddhist literature present a historically reliable portrayal of Aśoka's role and achievements?

(2) What impact did Aśoka's policy of "conquest through Dharma" *(dharmavijaya)* have on Indian life and thought during his own lifetime and later?

(3) Was Aśoka actually responsible for the decline and fall of the Mauryan Empire?

We shall commence our analysis by reviewing what each tra-

dition has highlighted as its concept or image of Aśoka as a historical personage.

2. Aśoka in the Mainstream Indian Tradition and Literature

It is regrettable but true that the mainstream Indian tradition and literature is well-nigh devoid of historical sense, and consequently conscious works of history are virtually non-existent. The nearest to a historical record are the Purāṇas, even though these works are avowedly religious in character and legendary in content. But on account of an artificially contrived stratagem to feign antiquity, they present their scanty but nevertheless invaluable genealogical lists as prophesies in the future tense rather than facts of past history. As Pargiter concluded, even in these lists, "the lack of the historical sense was a fertile source of confusion."[2]

The Purāṇas record hardly anything on Aśoka other than the "prophecy" that he would succeed Vindusāra (Bindusāra of Buddhist sources) and thus be the third monarch of the Mauryan Dynasty with a reign of 36 years. His Mauryan origin and descent from Candragupta, too, are recorded.

In contrast to the founder of the Mauryan Dynasty, Candragupta, on whom the mainstream Indian tradition and literature lavished much attention,[3] Aśoka had been relegated to oblivion. Either they deliberately ignored him on account on his partiality to Buddhism or his life of non-violent religious and social activity presented no events which captured their imagination and commanded romantic treatment in ballad, legend or drama. As stated by Romila Thapar in *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas,* the most comprehensive of the Aśokan monographs hitherto published: "In the Indian secular sources,

Aśoka remained largely a name in the dynastic king lists, as obscure during the later centuries as the script in which he had his edicts engraved. The fact that the work of Aśoka as a monarch was almost erased from Indian history and thought cannot be overlooked. The political value of Aśoka's ideals was successfully buried in the oblivion of the past…. No later king of any standing tried consciously to adopt these principles as the basis of his policy."[4]

It is for this reason that much attention is focused by Indian scholars on the sketchy account of a monarch named Aśoka in Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranginī,* the Kashmirian Chronicle of the twelfth century.[5] It is, of course, a king of Kashmir rather than the king of Magadha[6] or the Mauryan Emperor that we encounter in this Chronicle.[7] Here Aśoka figures as a king of ancient times, referred to in a list of eight kings *(pārthivāvali),* composed by Brahman Helārāja, and in a list of five kings, mentioned by the chronicler, Chavillākara. Here, Aśoka is introduced as the son of the grand-uncle of Śacināra and great-grandson of Śakuni, belonging to a dynasty established by Godhara.[8]

Kalhaṇa proceeds to ascribe the founding of Śrīnagar to this Aśoka, who is also said to have reconstructed the shrine of Vijayeśvara and erected within its enclosures two temples named Aśokeśvara. Thus far, the information presented by Kalhaṇa bears no semblance whatsoever to the historical Aśoka known from other sources. But two verses are considered significant:

> This king who had freed himself from sins and *embraced the doctrine of Jina,* covered Śuṣkaletra and Vitastārta with numerous stūpas. At the town of Vitastārta, there stood within the precincts of the Dharmāraṇya Vihāra a Caitya built by him, the height of which could not be reached by the eye.[9]

These verses are interpreted as conveying information on Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism and his patronage of the Buddhist Order. If that was really so, one wonders why it is worded in so obscure a manner. Why the doctrine of *Jina,* which in the twelfth century was easily confused with Jainism, and not the doctrine of the *Buddha*?[10]

These discrepancies, however, had not deterred some of the recent Aśokan scholars from accepting, with hardly a question, the identification of this Kashmirian Aśoka with the Mauryan Emperor. Perhaps Aurel Stein, who translated *Rājataraṅgiṇī* in 1900 with an extensive introduction and commentary, paved the way for this passive acceptance. He said:

> Kalhaṇa's account, in full agreement with historical fact as vouched for by Aśoka's own famous inscriptions, represents the king as a pious follower of the teaching of Buddha. The mention of Śuṣkaletra and Vitastārta in particular, as places where Aśoka had erected vihāras and stūpas, is significant as pointing to the survival in Kashmir of local traditions regarding him. That Buddhist tradition in Kashmir knew of Aśoka's connection with the valley is made quite certain by the records of the Chinese pilgrims.[11]

The later scholars not only conceded this identification but went further to give credence to Kalhaṇa's account of Aśoka's son and successor, Jalauka. According to *Rājataraṅgiṇī,* Aśoka propitiated Bhūteśa (i.e. Śiva) to obtain this son. Instructed by a Śaiva saint Avadhūta, described as the "vanquisher of Buddhist controversialists" (that is, hostile to Buddhism), Jalauka becomes a pious Śaivaite. His persecution of the Buddhists had resulted in retaliatory action through a witch. The episode ends with the account of the building of a Vihāra by Jalauka, who, however, continued his devotion to Siva.[12] The omission

of Jalauka's name in other records on Mauryan Aśoka does not seem to have deterred any of the scholars, perhaps with the exception of Romila Thapar. In her case, she takes great pains to equate Jalauka to Kuṇāla (the name of Emperor Aśoka's son in Northern Buddhist tradition) by explaining Jalauka as a confusion caused by a typographical error in Brahmi script.[13]

The readiness with which Kalhaṇa's accounts were relied upon by even the most astute of Aśokan scholars calls for an explanation.

As far as Aurel Stein was concerned, he did subject *Rājataraṅgiṇī* to a strictly critical examination. Although his statement quoted above sounds pretty conclusive, he was adequately cautious. He questioned Kalhaṇa's chronology which dates Aśoka around 1182 B.C. (i.e. at least eight centuries before the established date and curiously six centuries before the Buddha).[14] He also expresses doubt on Śacināra and Śakuni, Aśoka's alleged ancestors.[15] Stein's observations, which later scholars had unfortunately glossed over, undoubtedly deserve to be restated:

> It seems evident that Kashmirian tradition has preserved no recollection of Aśoka's true historical position as a great monarch ruling over the whole of Northern India. But by retaining his name at least in the list of Kashmirian kings it affords us a welcome indication that the sovereign sway of the historical Aśoka was acknowledged also in that distant region.... It is impossible for us to indicate what historical elements, if any, there are, in the Kashmirian tradition regarding Jalauka. The name of this alleged son of Aśoka cannot otherwise be traced in our available sources; and the account given of his reign in the Chronicle bears in its main part a manifestly legendary character.[16]

The credibility so surprisingly assigned by Indian scholars to the flimsy and, to our mind, indisputably shaky information

in Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī* as regards Aśoka and his successor might in all probability be conditioned by an understandable nationalistic bias. It is particularly remarkable that none had seriously questioned whether this Aśoka could have been a king of Kashmir with no connection whatsoever with the Mauryan Emperor at least as a working hypothesis, as Aśoka was in no way a restricted name applicable to the Mauryan monarch only. There had been other Aśokas in Indian history.[17]

The existence of this twelfth century account of *an* Aśoka (who could have even been only a Kashmirian ruler of some renown) seems to minimize the indignity that the life and achievements of the best documented monarch in Indian history have to be reconstructed from non-Hindu sources.[18] Hitherto, apart from Rudradaman's inscription (150 A.C.), the mainstream Indian tradition and literature have only drawn a virtual blank as regards Aśoka, the Mauryan Emperor, whom the intelligentsia of the modern world — not merely the scholars — hold in great esteem. This fact has had a significant influence on the evaluation of Emperor Aśoka's place in history as far as most of the scholars of Indian origin are concerned. We shall return to this question after we examine the information gleanable from Buddhist sources as to how they assessed Aśoka's place in history.

3. Aśoka of the Northern Buddhist Sources

In contrast to the relative silence of the secular and Hindu sources of India, the literatures of the Northern Schools of Buddhism in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan are replete with works in which Aśoka figures quite prominently. The earliest among them could have come into being between 150 and 50 B.C. As

the Sanskrit original is no longer extant, its actual title is not known but it has been called a "Book on King Aśoka." We know it from two Chinese translations: *A-yü-wang chuang* (i.e. Aśokāvadāna) by the Parthian Fa-k'in (281–306 A.C.) and *A-yü wang-ching (i.e.* Aśokarājasūtra) by Sanghabhadra or Sanghabhata in an abridged version in 512 A.C. This was the main source for the cycle of Aśoka legends in the *Divyāvadāna,* consisting of Pāṃśupradānāvadāna, Kuṇālāvadāna, Vitaśokāvadāna and Aśokāvadāna. The *Divyāvadāna,* in Buddhist Sanskrit prose interspersed with verse, contains older parts datable as early as the first century A.C. and later parts which could be as late as the fourth century.

Two more works in Sanskrit can claim antiquity. The last story (No. 100) of the *Avadānaśataka* would belong to the second century A.C. as it was translated into Chinese by mid-third century. The *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* of Kumāralāta was, in all probability, composed in the third century even though some consider the author to be a contemporary of Aśvaghoṣa and date him in the first century.

It is significant that all these works are Avadānas, and that means they belong to a class of pious literature glorifying deeds of self-sacrifice and piety of saints whether religious or lay. The word *avadāna* according to Maurice Winternitz means a "noteworthy deed, sometimes in a bad sense, but generally in the good sense of a heroic deed," with the Buddhists, "a religious or moral feat" and then also the "story of a noteworthy deed or feat." Such a "feat" may consist of the sacrifice of one's own life, but also merely a gift of incense, flowers, ointments, gold and precious stones or the erection of sanctuaries (stūpas, caityas and so on).[19] One should not expect accurately recorded historical information in such a form of literature, whose sole

purpose has been religious edification. The emphasis by the very nature of its primary objective has to be on either a religious lesson such as the practical demonstration of the law of karma or the example of piety set by the chosen hero. Thus one looks in vain for evidence in the Aśokan Avadānas to corroborate the information from other literary sources or from archaeological and epigraphical findings.

The problem of historicity of these legends has become further confounded by the fact that their actual hero was not Aśoka. The great personage who emerges as the ultimate hero, "the remover of all doubts," is Upagupta, the celebrated monk of Mathurā, who led Aśoka on a pilgrimage to holy sites, directed his services to the cause of Buddhism, and was at hand to provide him with explanations on crucial happenings by relating stories from past births.

The overshadowing of Aśoka by Upagupta is patently clear in the later poetical Avadānas like *Kalpadrumāvadānamālā, Aśokāvadānamālā, Dvāvimśatyāvadāna, Bhadrakalpāvadāna* and *Vratāvadānamālā,* where Aśoka more or less provides the occasion or audience or both for edifying religious discourses full of legends which were delivered by Upagupta. The same tendency has persisted in Kṣemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā,* which belongs to the mid-eleventh century and had been a popular work in Tibet as revealed by its Tibetan translation.

The Avadāna literature, to begin with, was not sectarian.[20] But as it became a branch of literary activity more actively pursued by the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna schools, the Aśokan legends, or more precisely the Upagupta legends, gained wide currency in the countries where these forms of Buddhism spread. As the Fourth Patriarch according to their tradition (i.e. after Mahākāśyapa, Ānanda and Sāṇakavāsi),

Upagupta commanded immense veneration and Chinese works like *Fo-tsu-t'ung-ki* and *San-kiau-yi-su* elaborated wondrous accounts of his conversion and conversions, bringing Aśoka into them as Upagupta was reputed to be his spiritual adviser.

With Aśoka thus occupying a secondary position to this spiritual adviser in the Avadāna literature, the information on the monarch is minimal and, as far as they can be verified, unreliable. This statement may be supported by analysing the data in the *Divyāvadāna:*

(1) Aśoka is placed exactly a century from the death of the Buddha. This discrepancy with other sources (specially the Greek sources which fix the date of the Mauryan accession without a modicum of doubt) has been explained as caused by confusing the Mauryan Aśoka with Kāḷāśoka of the Śiśunāga dynasty (the patron of the Second Council according to the Theravāda tradition). What is equally if not more probable is that Aśoka's date had been advanced by over a century to coincide with Upagupta. According to the Theravāda tradition as recorded in the Cullavagga of the Vinaya Piṭaka, as well as the Sri Lankan chronicles,[21] Saṇakavāsi, the disciple of Ānanda and the Third Patriarch of the Northern Buddhists, was not only a contemporary of Kāḷāśoka but also was a prime mover in finding Sabbakāmi to preside over the Second Council. Pali records know him and call him Sambhūta Sānavāsi,[22] Upagupta, who was his disciple, could thus have been a contemporary of Kāḷāśoka, rather than of Aśoka, the Mauryan Emperor. A further reason for the confusion between Kāḷāśoka and Aśoka is that they both ruled from Pāṭaliputra, the former having shifted his capital from Rājagaha to this city.

(2) The genealogy had been wrongly presented starting with Bimbisāra and Ajātaśatru and proceeding from Prasenajit of Mahāmaṇḍala to Nanda (in the singular as just one monarch) to Bindusāra (skipping Candragupta who is conspicuous by his absence in these records) and to his son by a brahmin lady, Aśokā.[23] An isolated reference to the Maurya Dynasty occurs elsewhere in a verse.[24] This genealogical list is not corroborated by any other in either the Purāṇas or the Sri Lankan sources.

(3) Aśoka's succession to the throne is shown as a peaceful, if not miraculous occurrence, with divine intervention, in spite of Bindusāra's desire to make Susīma his successor. Susīma who enters battle to assert his rights comes to his end by falling into a trap laid for him by Aśoka's minister.[25] There is no indication of any war of succession or any interregnum in the form of an interval between accession and coronation.

(4) During the first years as king, Aśoka is depicted as a cruel, short-tempered tyrant who could behead with his own hand five hundred ministers who refused to carry out an unreasonable order and also have five hundred ladies of the court burnt alive for cutting down a flowering tree.[26] He is also said to have established a torture-house, a veritable hell, from which none who entered was allowed to come out alive.[27] Apparently, the Emperor was depicted as an exceedingly wicked person so as to underscore the change of character with his conversion to Buddhism. But strangely, his propensity for wickedness is again reflected in the episode where he is said to have ordered a general massacre of Ājīvikas because one of them was involved in the desecration of a Buddha statue. This story negates Aśoka's principle of tolerance, upheld in his inscriptions.

(5) His conversion to Buddhism is ascribed to a monk by the name of Samudra, whose distinction to attract the Emperor's attention was that he escaped from the torture-house through his spiritual attainment.[28] This account differs from *either* Aśoka's own statement which relates his conversion or his dedication to Dhamma to the suffering caused by the Kalinga war *or* from the Sri Lankan episode of his encounter with Nyagrodha.

These discrepancies — poignant as they are — do not detract from the achievements of Aśoka as recognized by the Northern Buddhists. Again, on the basis of the *Divyāvadāna,* the following were what they remembered most of Aśoka:

(1) Converted to Buddhism by Samudra, he became a patron of Buddhism and thus a close associate of theras like Yasa and also a regular visitor to the Kukkuṭārāma monastery of Pāṭaliputra.

(2) He obtained, from the Droṇa Stūpa constructed by Ajātaśatru, the bodily relics of the Buddha and diffused them widely.[29]

(3) Enshrining the bodily relics, he constructed 84,000 stūpas, which were called Dharmarājika.[30]

(4) He conducted every five years a special ceremony (?), referred to as *Pañcavārṣika,* in which 300,000 monks (100,000 arahants and 200,000 others) were fed and 400,000 (gold coins) spent or distributed.[31]

(5) Guided by Upagupta of Mathurā (i.e the Fourth Patriarch of Northern Buddhists) he undertook a pilgrimage to all

holy places connected with the Buddha's life including shrines in honour of important disciples.[32]

(6) In munificence to the Buddhist Order he wished to excel Anāthapiṇḍika and spent as much as 96 crores. In his old age when misfortune had struck him and his grandson, Sampadi, controlled the treasury and he was reduced to the position that he could offer the Saṅgha only the juice of half a myrobalan, Aśoka makes a final bid to raise the balance 4 crores (to come up to his target of 100 crores) by donating the entire empire to the Saṅgha. His heirs had to redeem it by paying the 4 crores.[33]

These according to their tradition are the contributions to the promotion of Buddhism which had impressed the Mahāyāna and Vajrayana Schools of Buddhism. Their adherents considered Aśoka to be an exceptionally virtuous person. To them he was the ultimate ideal of a lay devotee and hence extolled in so many Avadānas. Thus, according to them, had Aśoka gained a place in history.

When the Chinese pilgrims, Fa-hien, Hiuen-tsang and I-tsing toured various parts of India, they not only visited shrines still believed to be constructed by Aśoka, saw pillars with inscriptions still attributed to him, and collected many legends which were prevalent among the Buddhists. Because of the Avadānas, Aśoka must have occupied a special place of veneration among Chinese Buddhists. As late as 1021 A.C., Chaing Hsia-pias in his hymn in honour of Buddhagayā Vihāra complimented Aśoka "as the righteous emperor who lived in the right perception of the truth of the religion of the Buddha and as the great builder of Buddhist shrines in India

whose noble fame travelled far and wide."[34] The Chinese tradition also affirmed that out of the 80,000 stūpas constructed by Aśoka, one nineteenth were assigned to China and one of them was identified as a stūpa on the hill Yo-wan-shan near Ningpo.[35] Even more significant as a mark of Chinese esteem is that monasteries and pagodas were constructed by imperial command in honour of Aśoka (A-yo).[36]

One may conclude from these data, that Aśoka the Emperor as a historical personage mattered little to Northern Buddhists and, as such, there existed no need to record and preserve accurate information about his career. The more exaggerated his devotion to Buddhism and his munificence to the Buddhist Order, the more he became worthy of adoration and emulation.

4. Aśoka of the Sri Lankan Pali Sources

The most fertile source of historical information on Aśoka has been the Pali literature of Sri Lanka, which recorded the Theravāda tradition on the introduction of Buddhism to the island and its development there. Events in India figure in this tradition as far as they led to the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.[37] Thus, apart from the life of the Buddha, the three Councils at which were rehearsed and formulated the Buddhist Canon and the schisms and schools occupied their main attention. In this tradition, Aśoka commanded paramount importance as patron of the Third Council, the promoter of the missionary movement to propagate Buddhism widely, and finally the father of the two great missionaries Mahinda and Saṅghamittā, to whom Sri Lanka owes its Buddhist Order.

As opposed to the attitude of the Northern Buddhists to

Aśoka, as elaborated in the previous section, the Theravādins considered him to be a part — indeed a very important part — of their ecclesiastical history. There was no need to glorify him with edifying tales of his deeds because he was not proffered as an example for emulation. So Theravadins had no *avadānas* (Pali: *apādana)* on him.[38] As Upagupta did not figure as a personage (certainly not a patriarch) in the Theravāda tradition, Aśoka was not associated with Upagupta's career and achievements either. Thus whatever the Theravāda tradition has recorded of Aśoka is history as the early monks knew and remembered it. Their objective being more *historical* in this case than *religious,* what they recorded was quite substantial and, as archaeological and epigraphical evidence have established, impressively reliable, in spite of inevitable religious elements like accounts of past births.[39]

The main sources of the Theravāda tradition on Aśoka are an ancient commentary in Sinhala,[40] no longer extant but widely quoted in later works; the two major Sri Lankan Chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* (fourth century) and the *Mahāvaṃsa* (fifth/sixth century); the *Samantapāsādikā* — the Vinaya Commentary by Buddhaghosa (fifth century); *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* or *Mahāvaṃsa Ṭīkā* (circa tenth century); and a great number of Pali and Sinhala chronicles dealing with the history of relics, stūpas, the Bodhi Tree, etc., loosely called the Vaṃsa literature.[41] Despite variations in detail, all these contain a fairly consistent account of Aśoka and his immediate predecessors.[42]

The initial reaction of the Western scholars to the evidence presented by the Sri Lankan Pali sources was quite negative. As early as 1879 Herman Oldenberg said:

> The stories of the Sinhalese concerning Mahinda may contain some germ of historical truth. This germ, however, has been

> surrounded by a coating of inventions which renders it impossible to place any faith in the traditions of Mahinda…. All this looks like a little truth and a great deal of fiction invented for the purpose of possessing a history of the origin of the Buddhist institution in the island and to connect it with the most distinguished person conceivable, the great Aśoka.[43]

The more vituperative denunciations by Vincent A. Smith and the conciliatory sentiments expressed by Rhys Davids are too well known to be elaborated here.[44] In the hands of early scholars, Sri Lankan sources suffered mishandling on two grounds. Either they lumped all Buddhist sources together and blamed the inaccuracies, exaggerations and extraneous paddings of one set of sources on all without discrimination, or they gave greater credence to Sanskrit and Chinese sources of the history of the Northern schools and discredited Sri Lankan data as inaccuracies, if not inventions. These tendencies continue even among more recent students of Indian history who for the most part depend on the early writers for their access to these sources. As a result, no fair assessment of the Sri Lankan Pali tradition on Aśoka has been hitherto possible. For example, statements like the following are yet being made:

> The religious sources, mainly Buddhist, naturally wishing to take advantage of the fact of Aśoka having been a Buddhist himself, have, as has rightly been said, made him out to be a monster of piety — a picture which is not endorsed by his own edicts and inscriptions.[45]
>
> The authenticity of the tradition of the Third Council is in doubt owing to the fact that only the Pali sources mention it.[46]

It is important that the Sri Lankan testimony on Aśoka is reviewed with much greater care. The Saṅgha of the island has, right through its existence to this date, taken a continuing inter-

est in both recording and studying its ecclesiastic history. In the process they have focused considerable attention on political, social and economic aspects. In this respect Sri Lanka's twenty-five centuries of written history remains a unique example in the whole of the Indian subcontinent.

The historical sense of the Saṅgha has been exceptionally well developed and the information recorded only by them has dramatically proved to be invaluable especially for the following purposes:

(1) The identification of "Piyadasi" of the Rock Edicts and Pillar Inscriptions with Aśoka, whose full name was preserved in Sri Lankan records only. Without this confirmation the historical interpretation of Aśokan inscriptions would have been long delayed by nearly a century, if not rendered impossible.

(2) The assessment of the role and achievements of Moggaliputta Tissa who had merited such special veneration in Mokan times as to have had his relics enshrined with the utmost honour in Stūpa No. 2 of Sānchi in a relic casket bearing the inscription *"Sapurisasa Mogalīputasa."* (Incidentally, similar finds have not yet established the historicity of any names like Upagupta or Yasa occurring in the Northern Buddhist records.)

(3) The establishment without doubt of the significance of the epithet *"Hemavatācariya"* occurring on the relic-caskets of Sānchi and Sonari Stūpas containing some remains of Majjhima, Kassapagotta and Dundubhissara, who, in a comprehensive list of missionaries sent out after the Third Council according to Sri Lankan Pali sources, were assigned the conversion of the Himalaya region. (This and the above information not only confirms the historicity of the Third Council and the missions but also provides the only literary support to the

missionary role claimed by Aśoka in R.E. XIII.)

(4) The identification and interpretation of the sculptured scene depicting the transplanting of a Bo-sapling, found on the eastern gateway of the Great Sānchi Stūpa as further confirmed by the symbolism of peacocks and lions in the decorative motifs which seem to reflect Maurya-Sinhala solidarity. (The very existence of the Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura further confirms the tradition.)

With such an array of confirmation from archaeological and epigraphical evidence, the Sri Lankan Pali sources deserve to be given a much higher degree of credibility specially when their information differs from that of Northern Buddhist records. For example, it is more likely that Aśoka was the viceroy of Bindusāra at Ujjain rather than Taxila and Mahinda his son rather than younger brother. It is also credible that Aśoka was called Caṇḍāśoka because of his wars of succession rather than for the gruesome acts of violence, including the establishment of a torture house, which defy imagination unless we are dealing with a demented criminal. Similarly, the episode regarding his massacre of Ājīvikas to avenge the desecration of a Buddha statue is beyond belief when considered along with his own commitment to non-violence and inter-religious tolerance. Sri Lankan historians were in no way interested in the successors of Aśoka. Apart from portraying the last days of Aśoka as unhappy on account of the machinations of Tissarakkhā, his second queen, Pali sources are silent on the fate of the Mauryan empire after Aśoka. This does not make the Pali sources historically inferior.

The place which the Sri Lankan Pali sources — faithfully copied and preserved in many versions in all other Theravāda

Buddhist countries,[47] namely, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos — have given Aśoka in history is as a pious and generous patron of Buddhism. The main aspects highlighted are as follows:

(1) Aśoka was attracted to Buddhism because of the serene demeanour of a Buddhist monk as contrasted with the usual conduct of the brahmin priests whom the court had traditionally supported. He began to seek the association of monks which proved intellectually and spiritually more satisfying.[48]

(2) His munificence to the Buddhist Order was immense. He was a great builder and the number of shrines constructed all over his empire on his command is held out as 84,000, possibly a traditional symbolism for "innumerable."[49] (N.B. Sanskrit Buddhist sources mention the same figure whereas Chinese sources have it as 80,000.)

(3) He was convinced that his patronage of Buddhism was not complete until and unless a child of his entered the Saṅgha. Accordingly, his son Mahinda and daughter Saṅghamittā were ordained. They became the missionaries to establish Buddhism in Sri Lanka and, as such, the heroes of the Sri Lankan tradition.[50]

(4) Aśoka's generosity had a negative effect on the Saṅgha in that many joined it to enjoy its privileges. The need arose for purge and reform. Aśoka himself gave his patronage to the cleansing process. At first, he even attempted to enforce his imperial authority. But in due course he had to seek the assistance of the senior monk, Moggaliputta Tissa.[51]

(5) The reformed Saṅgha undertook a programme of missions to propagate Buddhism in and around the empire of

Aśoka and, by implication, these missions were supported by the Emperor. At least as far as Sri Lanka was concerned, Aśoka continued to support the mission by sending sacred objects of veneration (i.e. relics, Bo-sapling, etc.), additional missionaries, and skilled craftsmen to erect shrines.[52]

In short, Aśoka was the instrument for the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. There was no special sanctity attached to him and he was not an object of veneration. He was for all purposes only a historical person — the greatest patron of Sri Lankan Buddhism and that was all. The entire Theravāda Buddhist world saw him in that role.

5. Aśoka of Edicts and Inscriptions

While for over 2,000 years, Aśoka was virtually forgotten, piously glorified, or gratefully remembered in each of the traditions which are dealt with above, the lithic records in his own words awaited discovery and study. It took a hundred years from the discovery of fragments of the Delhi-Meerut Pillar Inscription in 1750 by Father Tieffenthaler to the publication of a representative collection of edicts and inscriptions in Vol. I of Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum by Alexander Cunningham in 1879. With the publication of revised texts and translations by Hultzsch in 1925, students of history had an adequate tool for research although a comprehensive analysis was not attempted until Beni Madhab Barua published his *Aśoka and His Inscriptions* in 1945. More inscriptions have been since discovered and deciphered, among the latest being the four edicts found in 1969 in the Province of Laghman in Afghanistan.

The thirty-four lithic records of Aśoka — the major edicts and inscriptions in multiple copies located thousands of kilometres

apart — provide substantial information on the virtues which he upheld and wished to propagate among his subjects, his tolerant attitude to different religious sects, and the administrative machinery which he had utilized to spread his message of Dharma. His availability at all times to attend to his kingly duties was particularly emphasized. He voiced his concern over the welfare of the people (i.e. "All people are my children") and resorted to exhortation and restriction as a dual policy for the promotion of Dharma. He recounted the example he had himself set in minimizing the slaughter of animals and published what might be the earliest known list of protected species. He instructed his officials to be just and impartial and advised against harassment and excessive punitive measures. He listed the good deeds he had done both within and outside his empire and drew special attention to how he extended his policy of Dharmavijaya (i.e. conquest through righteousness) beyond his borders in all directions, especially to five Hellenic kingdoms of the West.

Striking a personal note, Aśoka recounted his gradual identification with Buddhism, gave expression to his knowledge and appreciation of a number of Buddhist texts, and announced his determination to wipe out schisms within the Saṅgha. His pilgrimages to Buddhist holy places were both mentioned and specifically commemorated with inscribed pillars in several places. His policy of religious tolerance was marked by references to donations to the Ājīvikas.

Amidst these informative statements of Aśoka, what proved to be remarkably impressive was his heart-felt repentance for the suffering he had caused in his attempt to conquer Kalinga. He deplored war and dedicated himself to conquest through Dharma. He exhorted his successors, too, "not to think of fresh conquest by arms as worth achieving" and "to adopt the policy

of forbearance and light punishment towards the vanquished even if they conquer people by arms." He said further: "They should regard the conquest through Dharma as the true conquest. Such a conquest brings happiness to all concerned both in this world and in the next."[53]

All this added up to more information than we have on any other monarch of ancient India. Yet these records said little of his personal history. His cryptic statement on Dharmavijaya needed clarification because there appeared to be a dichotomy between what he upheld as the Dharma to be propagated among his subjects — a universal moral code — and his personal religion which was Buddhism. His silence after the 28th regnal year aroused doubts about his last years and called the success of his policies into question.

Despite many a question that has yet to be answered satisfactorily, Aśoka of the edicts and inscriptions stands out prominently as a man of peace and non-violence, a denouncer of war and an exemplary ruler devoted to the welfare of the people and dedicated to their moral regeneration. By his own words, he has earned the evaluation which H.G. Wells formulated so enthusiastically in 1920 in the following terms: "Amidst tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Aśoka shines, and shines alone, a star."[54]

6. Aśoka in the Eyes of Recent Writers & Scholars

With all this information from diverse sources and specially his own lithic records coming almost all together to the attention of Indian and Indological students a little over a century ago, Aśoka burst into the limelight, as it were. He received

from them a rousing welcome characterized by comparisons with a multitude of historical personages. In the words of Radhakumud Mookerji:

> In the annals of kingship, there is scarcely any record, comparable to that of Aśoka, both as a man and as a ruler. To bring out the chief features of his greatness, historians have constituted comparisons between him and other distinguished monarchs in history, eastern and western, ancient and modern, the pagan, Moslem and Christian. In his efforts to establish a kingdom of righteousness after the highest ideals of a theocracy, he has been likened to David and Solomon of Israel in the days of its greatest glory; in his patronage of Buddhism, which helped to transform a local into a world religion, he has been compared to Constantine in relation to Christianity; in his philosophy and piety he recalls Marcus Aurelius; he was Charlemagne in the extent of his empire and, to some extent, in the methods of his administration too, while his Edicts "rugged, uncouth, involved, full of repetitions" read like the speeches of Oliver Cromwell in their mannerisms. Lastly, he has been compared to Khalif Omar and Emperor Akbar, whom also he resembles in certain respects.[55]

Mookerji, himself, proceeded to compare Aśoka to King Arthur, King Alfred and King St. Louis of France as regards the mass of tradition which had gathered round his name. The comparisons do not end with kings and emperors. A Sri Lankan writer went further when he said, "Aśoka was the Lenin of Buddhism, as he was the first to translate the Buddha's Way of Life into a polity."[56] Whatever these comparisons were expected to convey by their ingenious authors, they have all proved to be both inadequate and misleading as regards the assessment of Aśoka's legitimate place in history. They were not meant to be taken as sound, objective scholarly evaluations.

So also were the numerous adulations which poured

from the pens of many an intellectual or political leader who admired Aśoka for what he said and believed. Among them, Jawaharlal Nehru said:

> Aśoka's pillars of stone with their inscriptions would speak to me in their magnificent language and tell me of a man, who, though an emperor, was greater than any king or emperors'
>
> This astonishing ruler, beloved still in India and in many other parts of Asia, devoted himself to the spread of Buddha's teachings, to righteousness and goodwill, and to public works for the good of the people. He was no passive spectator of events, lost in contemplation and self-improvement. He laboured hard at public business and declared he was ready for it.[58]

The Sri Lankan writer quoted just above waxed eloquent as he outlined the role of Aśoka in what was meant to be a prelude to a serious analysis of the state of Buddhism on the eve of the 2,500th death anniversary of the Buddha. He wrote:

> Aśoka, the mighty conqueror, sheathing his sword forever after the conquest of Kalinga, became transformed into the world's most compassionate monarch. The Lord of Hindustan became the Lord of Compassion. Declaring his admiration for the Buddhist ethic, he set up a humane government, whose officials were instructed to provide free medical attention, a compassionate jail administration, poor relief, old age pensions, amenities for travellers and animal hospitals; while he admonished the people to be dutiful to parents, kind to children and servants, charitable and tolerant. Aśoka's frontier policy was in the same vein; he renounced war as a method of settling disputes, and in a proclamation addressed to the border tribes he told them not to be afraid of him, for his heartfelt desire was to be good to them.
>
> On the numerous stone pillars that Aśoka set up were long inscriptions in which he lectured to the people in a fatherly tone, and to some extent took them into his confidence, explaining

how he had been touched to believe in the Buddha's conception of right conduct by the shock he had sustained in the early years of his reign by seeing with his own eyes the miseries he had inflicted on the Kalinga State to the south of him, by making war on it.

Aśoka modelled himself after the Buddha, and worked for the welfare and happiness of his subjects, whom he considered "my children." He carried out the principle of Love that the Buddha had stressed by extending his hand of friendship even to the peoples outside his domain. Aśoka literally means "without sorrow," the name of the ideal state of life that the Buddha aspired to achieve. Of the successors who added their own quota to the achievements of the Buddha, Aśoka heads the list. He delighted in calling himself, not Aśoka, but Priyadarśi, He-who-has-realized-the-good (of the people); and on that score he was Devānampriya, "beloved of the gods."

Aśoka's reign was the Golden Age of India. His vast empire became a land of peace and happiness. Here was a ruler who ruled according to the law of the Buddha. Aśoka was imbued with the spirit of the teaching of the Master, he was one who lived the Law. He looked after the people as a saint looks after humanity. He completely gave himself up to the Master, to the Dhamma, to the Sangha and to the people. Inscribed rocks and stone pillars, still found from Kashmir to Orissa, bear testimony to the extent of Aśoka's Empire, the righteousness and wisdom of his rule and the nobility of his character. His kingdom from plain to mountain-cave was freedom's home.

The spread of Buddhism in India at first was due to the efforts of the Sangha which handed down the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha. The Emperor Aśoka took a personal interest in spreading his new faith in India, and in foreign countries with which he had political and commercial relations.[59]

But sometimes adulation exceeded the limits of accuracy. For instance, Joseph McCabe in his *The Golden Ages of History*

ascribed to Aśoka ideas and deeds which none of the known sources of history — least of all his inscriptions — could bear out:

> Aśoka did not confine his improvement of the State to a correction of individual conduct. He built a number of hospitals and had large gardens of medicinal herbs which he distributed to the poor. He reformed the prisons and, anticipating our advanced ideas on the subject, urged officials to help prisoners to see the blunder of crime rather than punish them. He recommended the education and kindly treatment of slaves and servants. He built hostels, dug wells and planted trees along the roads for travellers. He opened spinning houses (workshops) for widows and poor women and made provision for the aged. He had thousands of vessels of water placed on the streets of his capital to meet contingency of fire, and he imposed a fine upon any man who would not help to extinguish a fire in his neighbour's house. He made it a penal offence to throw dead animals or filth upon the streets. He instituted a department of State to attend to the welfare of the backward races in his Empire. And, above all, he denounced war and most ardently desired the friendly intercourse of all nations, sending his missionaries as far as Syria in the West to preach his gospel. His own people were his children, but all men were his brothers.[60]

It is obvious that some of the popular writers read more into the information contained in Aśoka's edicts and inscriptions and exaggerated Aśoka's importance on the basis of the favourable impressions formed mainly on account of his denunciation of war, promotion of religious tolerance and implementation of welfare measures. In their eyes, Aśoka was a model ruler and the kind of sentiments expressed by them might be summarized by referring to Sir Peter Medawar, Laureate of the 1985 Unesco Kalinga Prize, who wished that Aśoka should have been the "Emperor of the World" today; or, again, to Jawaharlal

Nehru who said, "Aśoka is one of the most magnificent names not only in India's history but in world history."[61]

But to the students of history, Aśoka presented a multitude of problems on account of the very plethora of data which they had to scrutinize, analyse and sift for historical facts. Once they had overcome the first barrier presented by the linguistic aspects of establishing the relevant texts of both inscriptions and the Pali and Sanskrit works, the main question which confronted them was the relative reliability and accuracy of each statement in these records. As observed in the previous sections of this paper, many a contradictory statement awaited resolution or explanation.

At the very outset a significant division of opinion became evident. Western scholars, especially linguists who read the texts in their original languages like Max Miiller, Senart, Rhys Davids, Oldenberg, Geiger and Norman, were impressed with the value of the historical information gleanable from the Buddhist records, especially the Sri Lankan Pali sources. It was E. Senart who said; "I believe that the Chronicles (i.e. *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa)* have, in certain details, under the name of Aśoka, preserved of our Piyadasi recollections sufficiently exact, not only to allow a substantial agreement to appear, but even to contribute usefully to the intelligence of obscure passages in our monuments."[62] And Sylvain Levi found on a comparison of Chinese annals with Sri Lankan Chronicles that the latter beginning from the 4th century B.C. were, as historical sources, sound, if not impeccable.[63]

Rhys Davids summarized his analysis of the Sri Lankan sources with the statement that "we may be unfeignedly grateful to these old students and writers for having preserved as much as we can gather from their imperfect records."[64] About

the only scholar of the West to dispute the reliability of these records was R.O. Franke, whose objections were effectively refuted by Wilhelm Geiger.[65]

In contrast, scholars of Indian origin invariably questioned the veracity of all Buddhist sources including the Sri Lankan Pali records. They seemed to work on a rule-of-thumb that Aśoka's lithic records supersede in accuracy and reliability all literary sources, and that whatever information is omitted in the inscriptions but stated in literary sources should be suspected and therefore rejected — as "monkish inventions." As regards the first part of this assumption, there can be no dispute. But the second part attributes to the inscriptions a comprehensiveness in recording the life, the career and the achievements of Aśoka, which is totally unjustified. As a result of the anxiety to discredit literary sources, statements which strangely made a case in favour of *ex-silentio* evidence proliferated, like the following by Sukumar Dull:

> In the edicts, he nowhere alludes to the alleged Council held at Pāṭaliputra, although such an allusion would have been appropriate in Sarnath, Calcutta-Bairat and some other edicts. This *ex-silentio* evidence is more weighty than the motived assertions of the monk-makers of Aśokan legends.[66]

Ignoring the epigraphically established historicity of Moggaliputta Tissa, the President of the Third Council, and the ascription of the authorship of the *Kathāvatthu* to him, the same scholar stated categorically, "But there is no historical foundation for the legend."[67]

As Aśoka had specifically affirmed his personal faith in Buddhism in several edicts, these scholars had to concede it as a fact, with unconcealed reluctance. They seemed compelled to consider Aśoka's partiality to Buddhism an aberration, needing

explanation. So they continued to question all that the Buddhist tradition claimed to be his contribution to the promotion of Buddhism as a religion within and outside his empire. These were dismissed with the typical remark by Dutt: "His true significance in Buddhist history is perhaps moree symbolic than intrinsic."[68]

Dutt went on to state:

> Aśoka was a Buddhist himself, but on the question of his relationship to Buddhism, it is necessary to "clear our minds of cant." In approaching it, even normally sure-footed historians are seen to stumble into three pitfalls, viz. (i) that Aśoka in his old age became the "Head of the Buddhist Church," that is, a sort of administrator-in-chief to the Sangha; (ii) that he took an active and energetic part in the propagation of Buddhism; and (iii) that he sent missions to foreign countries for the spread of the religion. These are fallacies conveyed sedulously from book to book, though the first one is devoid of meaning and the other two rest practically on no historical basis.[69]

It is correct that the first of the three statements is devoid of meaning for it was an attempt by Dutt himself to paraphrase, with an obvious slant, two statements of Vincent A. Smith, which are quoted in a footnote, namely, "Aśoka distinctly adopted the position of ruler of both Church and State during the last twenty-five years of his life, just as Charlemagne did long afterwards in Europe"[70] and "From about 259 B.C. Aśoka applied his autocratic power to the Buddhist Church which he ruled as its head."[71] This is how Smith understood Aśoka's position in examining MRE III where the Emperor admonishes that monks and nuns *"should* constantly listen to and reflect" on texts *"prescribed"* by him and MPE I (Schism Edicts of Allahabad-Kosambi, Sānchi and Sarnath) where he *"ordered"* the Saṅgha that it *"should act"* in

such a way that no heretical monks could enter and cause disunity in the community. It is perfectly understandable for an Anglo-Indian Civil Servant to conclude quite erroneously, of course, that the Emperor who issued such orders should have had some kind of authority over the Sangha as its head. The Pali sources of Sri Lanka explain in some detail the relationship between Aśoka and the Sangha far more clearly. They would have shown him that the Sangha admitted no head even among the monks and to recognize a layman in such a capacity was unthinkable. But these explanations were disregarded as all the evidence from these sources was indiscriminately rejected. In any case, Sukumar Dutt in 1955 was flogging a dead horse as this theory of Smith had been long rejected by all serious students of Indian or Buddhist history.

As regards the other two statements on Aśoka's role in the propagation of Buddhism, Sukumar Dutt again had to ignore the evidence of the Buddhist sources and resort to such arguments as the following:

> (1) "The illusory idea that the Emperor was an enthusiast and propagandist of Buddhism arises from undiscerning identification of 'Dhamma,' wherever it occurs in the edicts, with the Buddhist religion."[72]
>
> (2) "But the Dhamma, for which the Emperor was an enthusiast, was not Dhamma in any formal, cultish or clerical sense."[73]
>
> (3) "With this popular, non-scholastic, non-doctrinal conception of the Dhamma, Aśoka's concern about the purgation of heresies from the Sangha, described in the legends, does not seem to fit well."[74] (Here, of course, he suppresses the fact that Aśoka's concern over heresies in the Sangha is expressed with adequate clarity in the three Schism Edicts.)

He had, nevertheless, to admit that "in one single edict only (Calcutta-Bairat), the term 'Dhamma' occurs in its approved scriptural connotation of Buddhavacana as understood and recognized by monks."[75] But, as if compulsively urged to minimize the importance of this fact, he added: "The Emperor appears to have been neither well-versed nor keenly interested in them (i.e. Buddhist scriptures), though, speaking to learned monks, he makes a little show of learning by working into the phraseology of the edict a small quotation from a scriptural passage."[76]

This reference to a small quotation from a scriptural passage shows that, writing in 1955, Sukumar Dutt either deliberately ignored or was not aware of the invaluable work done by Beni Madhab Barua, who had analysed the phraseology of Aśoka with meticulous care and identified numerous (*a*) very close correspondences with Buddhavacana, (*b*) technical terms drawn from Buddhavacana, and (*c*) parallels between Aśokavacana and Buddhavacana.[77] What is clear is that, if Aśoka was no student of Buddhist texts, his drafting staff certainly had people fully conversant with the Buddhist Canon.

Eight years after the work of Sukumar Dutt was published, there appeared Romila Thapar's monograph *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas,* a product of intensive research done in London under the guidance of A. L. Basham. Her summary dismissal of the Buddhist sources with the statement that they made Aśoka "a monster of piety" was already mentioned.

The hypotheses which she tried to establish are:

(1) that Aśoka was "not the naive and extreme pacifist some historians have attempted to make of him"[78] nor "the naive convert to Buddhism that Buddhist sources would have us believe";[79] and

(2) that he used Buddhism — or rather the widespread social movement engendered by it — for his own political purposes, just as a shrewd and even opportunistic politician might do.

This latter hypothesis presented at the beginning and reiterated as the conclusion is stated as follows:

> In our analysis of the subject we find that Aśoka was attracted to Buddhism, but his was not a case of a somewhat eccentric or unusual overnight conversion. We believe that in the context of society as it was then, Buddhism was not just another religion. It was the result of a more widespread movement towards change which affected many aspects of life from personal beliefs to social ideas. It was a socio-intellectual movement with a large range of expression, making itself apparent in contemporary thought and life. *A king with a policy only slightly more imaginative than usual would have had to come to terms with such an important new development. As it was, it was an ideal tool for an ambitious ruler of Aśoka's calibre.* Whatever his personal convictions may have been regarding the religion, it was eminently suitable for such a ruler who wished to use it to consolidate political and economic power.[80]
>
> After examining the background which was largely responsible for the personality of Aśoka, we would reassert our earlier hypothesis that Aśoka's greatness lay in the fact that *he was equipped both by his own endeavour and by circumstances, to understand the culture to which he belonged and its then rapidly changing requirements; this characteristic was coupled with an extraordinary degree of idealism. Both of these gave him the courage which he needed to experiment with the contemporary situation and strike out towards an uncommon solution.* (Emphasis mine.)[81]

In outlining the social imperatives which influenced Aśoka's policy of Dhamma, she worked out the following scenario:

The Mauryan period was the culminating epoch of a few centuries of rational inquiry and cultural advance. The change from nomadic pastoral culture of the early Aryans to a more settled culture of an urban nature was due in no small part to the increased use of iron resulting in improved techniques. New lands were cleared and the population began to move towards the east. The fertile land of the Ganges valley was a good area for settlement and colonization…. The Ganges itself introduced to a new economic life, that of river trade…. *With these tremendous changes in the economic life of the times, changes in the social culture were inevitable. It was natural that the commercial classes would assert themselves and chafe under the indignity of being regarded as a lower class.* They were denied social prestige….

The change to an urban culture meant a more closely defined social organization. Community life having become more complex it was necessary to revise previously held ideas on individual participation in communal life. *The Brahmanical solution to this problem was to increase the rigidity of the caste system. The Buddhists came nearest to understanding it and developed a system of social ethics whereby responsibility was placed in the hands of each individual….* The social transition and territorial expansion of this time gave it the character of a period of emergency, which made a strong controlling force all the more necessary.[82]…

This political change introduced the idea of wider citizenship concerned with more than local happenings. *Buddhism was suited to this situation so far as it emphasized a broader social consciousness, unlike Brahmanism in which social responsibility was significant largely within the confines of each caste.*[83]

By moving away from orthodox Brahmanism though not opposing it, and by giving open support to Buddhism and certain other sects such as the Ājīvikas , *he (Aśoka) was seeking the potential support of non-orthodox elements which may eventually have succeeded in weaning away from orthodoxy,* and in the end making his own principles more acceptable to the populace. *He was aided*

> *in this by the fact that these sects had the suppport of the newly risen commercial class and the mass of the population was not antagonistic to them.* In addition to this, the new beliefs were not violently opposed to the old and it was therefore possible to bring about a compromise. Thus Aśoka saw the practical advantage of adopting the idea of the *Dhamma*.[84]…
>
> It is indeed no paradox to say that Aśoka's political use of Buddhism did not exclude him from joining the ranks of the sincere believers….[85]
>
> We are of the opinion that *Dhamma* was Aśoka's own invention…. If his policy of Dhamma had been merely a recording of Buddhist principles, Aśoka would have stated so openly, since he never sought to hide his support to Buddhism.[86]… There was no doubt that he was a religious man. But it would appear that until his later years he was not given to religious formalism.[87]… For Aśoka, *Dhamma* was a way of life, the essence of what he had culled from the moral teachings of the various thinkers known to him, and probably his own experience of life.[88]… The *Dhamma* of Aśoka emerges as a way of life incorporating a number of ideas and practices.[89]…
>
> In interpreting the term *Dhamma* we must beware of equating it with the Buddhist *Dhamma* or any other accepted system which was called by this generic term…. *Dhamma* was largely an ethical concept related to the individual in the context of his society. *In the propagation of his Dhamma Aśoka was attempting to reform the narrow attitude of religious teaching, to protect the weak against the strong, and to promote throughout the empire a consciousness of social behaviour so broad in its scope,* that no cultural group could object to it.[90]…

If all the information that we have of Aśoka were confined to the contents of the thirty-four edicts and other inscriptions, there could be no difficulty in accepting Romila Thapar's ingenious theory on the evolution of Aśoka's Dhamma as a conscious effort to solve the emerging socio-economic and cultural

problems of his times. It is quite probable that Aśoka's objective for the propagation of his simplified code of ethics embodying his Dhamma was as argued out by her even though he is made to appear not merely pragmatic but also hypocritical. The literary sources, however, cannot be altogether overlooked nor the archaeological and epigraphical evidence. Even without taking up the issue whether Aśoka wooed non-orthodox elements as an overt or covert effort to prevent them from weaning away from orthodoxy (see the sentence emphasized in the quotation from p. 215 above), it could be asked whether Aśoka had earned his place in history only on account of his formulation of the *Dhamma.*

In this connection, it is important to recall that Thapar had further observed:

> Even the popular mind despite the existence of his inscriptions and pillars failed to retain any legends or traditions regarding Aśoka. The contemporary cult is of recent origin. Curiously enough, Aśokan pillars have reverted to their function of the pre-historic period, and are revered as *lingas.* One wonders what Aśoka's reactions would have been had he seen that far into the future.[91]

This statement is no doubt correct as far as the popular Indian mind is concerned. But what it has retained of any historical figure in Indian history is quite negligible. Despite lithic and literary records, the popular Indian mind recalls little of Khāravela or Samudragupta, Harṣa or Lalitāditya. Despite an impressive artistic and literary heritage, little of the achievements of the Gupta Dynasty were remembered by the people. It is not that these rulers and their achievements, whether in the propagation of Dhamma or territorial conquests or cultural promotion, had no impact on their contemporaries; it is more plausible that whatever memories the popular mind preserved

of the land's greatest moments in history were erased during the exceptionally long period when India remained under colonial domination. It is often overlooked that no country in the world other than India had suffered such a long period of foreign subjugation, extending beyond a millennium. All that is great in Indian culture had thus to be rediscovered during the last hundred years or so. It is, therefore, our contention that the obliteration from the popular mind is not confined to Aśoka and his Dhamma only.

As regards Aśoka's achievements and claim to greatness, if his conquest by righteousness through his edicts and inscriptions, diplomatic envoys and Dhamma Mahāmātras had been forgotten by the people, his patronage to Buddhism, his munificence, his involvement in the affairs of the Sangha, his pilgrimages and his support to the propagation of Buddhism have been preserved in living memory unbroken for twenty-three centuries. As we have shown, his contribution to Buddhism has been gratefully recalled and appreciated throughout the centuries by the beneficiaries of his interventions outside the Indian subcontinent. Thus, if Aśoka gained no place in the history of India through his Dharmavijaya, his role vis-a-vis Buddhism assured him a secure and lofty place in the ecclesiastical history of Buddhism.

7. Aśoka and the Decline and Fall of the Mauryan Empire

Mainly by disregarding the evidence of the Buddhist sources, Sukumar Dutt and Romila Thapar underplayed Aśoka's contribution to the rise and spread of Buddhism. In contrast, another group of Indian scholars, belonging to an earlier generation, blamed Aśoka for his religious policy and particularly his

identification with Buddhism for many an ill that befell India, immediately after him as well as much later. They were convinced that Aśoka's pacifist policy undermined the strength of the empire, on the one hand, and on the other that his partiality to Buddhism brought about a Brahmanical reaction which fifty years later resulted in the overthrow of the Mauryan Dynasty by Puṣyamitra.

It is true that the Mauryan Empire began to crumble immediately after the death of Aśoka. No powerful emperor succeeded him. The chaotic accounts of his successors as preserved in the Northern Buddhist records and Purāṇas can best be explained as reflecting the disintegration of the empire to kingdoms and principalities. Obviously, Theravāda Buddhist tradition was not interested in the history of the Mauryan Empire after Aśoka. It represented the last days of the Emperor as unhappy and attributed his death to the sorrow caused by the destruction of the Bodhi Tree by his jealous wife Tissārakkhā.[92]

Among the scholars who traced the decline and fall of the Mauryan Empire to the impact of or reaction to Aśoka's policy, the most important were Hariprasad Sastri, D.R. Bhandarkar, K.P. Jayaswal and H.C. Raychaudhuri. Hariprasad Sastri's arguments were based on certain passages in the inscriptions which he interpreted as indicative of deliberate anti-Brahmanical policy. These have, however, been refuted by Romila Thapar.[93]

Bhandarkar's opinion was based less on facts and more on general impressions. His analysis was as follows:

> The effects of this change of policy of the replacement of Vijaya by Dharmavijaya were politically disastrous though spiritually glorious…. The Hindu mind, which was spiritual,

> became infinitely more spiritual. But that must have created some apathy to militarism, political greatness and material well-being…. Aśoka's new angle of vision, however, sounded a death-knell to the Indian aspiration of a centralized national state and world-wide empire. The effects of his policy were manifest soon after his death…. We know how very afraid the Greeks were of the Magadha army even when they were led by Alexander. What is worse is that the Greek inroads, soon after the demise of Aśoka, for which the change of foreign policy appears to be responsible, opened a passage for the various wild hordes, such as the Śakas, Pahlavas, Kushāṇas, Hūnas, Gurjaras and so forth, whom we now find pouring unceasingly into the country till the sixth century A.D. and eclipsing the sovereignty of indigenous rulers, with such exceptions only as the Śungas and Guptas.[94]

Jayaswal was even more emphatic on the assumed long-range impact of Aśoka's policy:

> The accident of the presence on the throne, at a particular juncture in history, of a man who was designed by nature to fill the chair of an abbot, put back events not by centuries but by millenniums.[95]

Raychaudhuri also argued on similar lines:

> Aśoka had given up the aggressive militarism of his forefathers and had evolved a policy of Dharma-vijaya which must have seriously impaired the military efficiency of his empire. He had called upon his sons and even greatgrandsons to eschew new conquests, avoid shedding the blood and take pleasure in patience and gentleness. These latter had heard more of Dharma-ghosha than Bherighosha. It is, therefore, not at all surprising that the *rois faineants* who succeeded to the imperial throne of Pāṭaliputra proved unequal to the task of maintaining the integrity of the mighty fabric reared by the genius of Candragupta and Chānakya.[96]

Being speculations built upon impressions rather than factual evidence, these opinions hardly merit discussion. Moreso, they have been amply dealt with and refuted by Nilakanta Sastri, Beni Madhab Barua and Romila Thapar.[97] In Nilakanta Sastri's words:

> Aśoka's pacifism, his abandonment of war as an instrument of policy and his exhortation to his successors to follow him in this respect, had nothing doctrinaire about it, and was kept within limits by wise awareness of the complexity of human situations and motives. There is no evidence that he diminished the strength of the army or weakened the defences of the empire. Dynastic empires depend for their continued existence on the supply of able monarchs in the line; Aśoka was great in every way; he was not only the greatest of the Mauryas, but one of the few truly great rulers of the world. There was evidently none among his children equal to the task of maintaining the unity of the vast empire, and the division, which, according to legend, threatened the empire even at the accession of Aśoka, actually overtook it after the close of his reign.[98]

Elsewhere, he argued against Bhandarkar and the others by drawing a parallel with the successors of Aurangzeb: "Did he who spent a whole lifetime in war leave the Mughal empire stronger and render the task of his successors easier?"[99]

Scholars have been looking for other causes for the decline and fall of the Mauryan Empire. They range from economic upheaval to the breakdown of bureaucracy and over-decentralization of authority. Here, too, the responsibility is assigned to Aśoka who is accused of excessive generosity to religious causes, expansion of the bureaucracy with new positions and entrusting provincial responsibility to officials like the Rajjukas and Prādeśikas. The last factor is said to have brought into existence corrupt and wicked officials and rebellion in

frontier areas as a reaction against them. All these theories call for careful re-examination, weighing and sifting all evidence gleanable from Buddhist sources, because the lithic records of Aśoka, as are hitherto available, are silent on his last decade as emperor.

8. Conclusion

This review of a number of prevalent opinions on the place of Aśoka in history has enabled us to answer the three main questions to which we focused attention. These answers in brief would be as follows:

(1) On the criterion of being corroborated by independent literary, archaeological or epigraphical evidence, the Sri Lankan Pali records and the Theravāda tradition founded on them can be relied upon as providing a credible account of the role and achievements of Aśoka as far as his services to the Buddhist cause are concerned.

The Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan sources of the Northern Buddhist tradition do reflect the memory of Aśoka's munificence, pilgrimages and religious buildings. But their historical reliability has been considerably reduced, firstly, because Aśoka figured in Avadānas where his spiritual adviser Upagupta was more prominent, and, secondly, because the chronology had been confused due to Upagupta's contemporaneity with Kāḷāśoka. Compared to these, the least helpful are the Purāṇas, while Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranginị̄* can hardly be a historical source for Aśoka the Mauryan Emperor.

The majority of the Indian scholars have graded the credibility of these in exactly the reverse order, besides assuming that the lithic records of Aśoka are a complete representation of the Emperor's life, career, achievements and thought. Whatever information is given by Buddhist sources which these records do not corroborate is, therefore, rejected as monkish inventions. But this rigour of treatment does not extend to *Rājataranginị̄* or the Purāṇas.

Many of the problems in determining accurately Aśoka's place in history are to be traced to the proper evaluation of the historicity of these sources.

(2) The impact of Aśoka's policy of Dharmavijaya on contemporary India cannot be in any way evaluated as the sources at our disposal say nothing on it. If Aśoka had not elaborated his concept of Dhamma and the efforts he made to propagate it by means of his own edicts and inscriptions, both his Dhamma and the policy of Dharmavijaya would have gone into oblivion. The mainstream Indian literature and tradition had either ignored or forgotten him.

An obvious assumption would be that neither his Dhamma nor his policy of Dharmavijaya made any lasting impression in the Indian mind. On the contrary, he was not only remembered gratefully but even glorified sanctimoniously for his unique contribution to Buddhism by both the Theravāda Buddhists of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia and the Mahāyāna Buddhists of Northern and Eastern Asia.

This paradox becomes more confusing on account of the determined effort of several Indian scholars to prove that the Dhamma of Aśoka should not be equated with Buddhism.

Present-day India has been so impressed with Aśoka's denunciation of war and his formulation of simple but essential virtues that he is showered with unbounded adulations. How was it that a similar reaction did not manifest itself during his own time and subsequent centuries? Why did his services appeal only to the Buddhists? Could it be that, despite the rigorously non-sectarian wording in the edicts and inscriptions, what Aśoka strove for and achieved was the propagation of Buddhism? The impact of such an effort has, of course, been tremendous and the place in history which the Buddhists have accorded to him for it is undisputed.

(3) Like most of the theories which recent scholars have advanced on Aśoka's role and achievements, those ascribing to him responsibility for the decline and fall of the Mauryan Empire are founded on either inadequately evaluated evidence or on prejudices and pre-conceived notions having a bearing on nationalistic and religious feelings of such scholars. It appears far-fetched to attribute the weakness of Aśoka's successors to his pacifist religious policies. Even more difficult is it to support the view that Aśoka's patronage to Buddhism caused the fall of the dynasty fifty years later.

An overall conclusion which emerges from this study is that much work has yet to be done to obtain a clear picture of Aśoka's life, career and achievements. A fair assessment of the Buddhist sources, in general, and Sri Lankan Pali sources in particular, is a pre-requisite for the removal of quite a number of misconceptions and the clarification of many a puzzle.



Notes

1. Although *Asiatic Researches* had published the transcripts of the Delhi Topra Pillar Inscription and parts of the Allahabad-Kosambi Pillar Inscription in 1801 and the *Journal of the Bengal Asiatic Society* had published a transcript of the Allahabad Pillar in 1834, the major landmark in Aśokan studies was the publication by James Prinsep of the reading and translation of the Delhi-Topra Pillar Inscription in JASB Vol. VI in 1837, followed by his comparative study of Aśokan inscriptions of Gimar and Dhauli in JASB Vol. VII in 1838. Even then the Maski Rock Inscription with the name of Aśoka was not discovered until 1915.

2. F.E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1972), p. 63. He identified six causes for such confusions:
   (1) confusing different persons of the same name;
   (2) confusing kings, rishis and others with mythological persons of the same names;
   (3) not distinguishing between different periods and often misplacing persons chronologically and bringing together as contemporaries persons who were widely separated in time;
   (4) obliterating the difference between reality and mythology;
   (5) misapplying freely historical or other tradition to new places and conditions to subserve religious ends;
   (6) taking a person or incident from historical tradition and fabricating edifying religious tales thereon.

   For examples of confusions of each type, see Ibid, pp. 63–77. See also note 18 for A.L. Basham's explanation.

3. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *Age of the Nandas and Mauryas* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1967), pp. 123 ff. References in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya, Milinda-pañha, Theragāthā commentary, Pariṣiṣṭaparvan* and the Sri Lankan Pali records are mentioned along with such works as *Bṛhatkathā, Caṇḍakauśikā, Mudrārākṣasa, Viṣṇupurāṇa* commentary, and *Cāṇakya-candragupta-kathā.*

4. Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas,* 5th Impression, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 214.

5. For example, Ibid, p. 29: "The Rājataranginị̄... does not relate any of these stories. Here Aśoka is described simply as a follower of the doctrine of the Jina (i.e. Buddha) and active in the building of Stūpas and magnificent Caityas"; p. 30: "The Rājataranginị̄ mentions Jalauka as another son of Aśoka"; p. 193: "This appears to be confirmed by the Rājataranginị̄ which speaks of Jalauka expelling the *mleccha* from Gandhāra." See also J.N. and P.N. Ganhar, *Buddhism in Kashmir and Ladakh* (New Delhi, 1956), Chapters III and IV.

6. In the Bairat-Calcutta Inscription, Aśoka describes himself as "Rājā Māgadhe."

7. M.A. Stein, *Kalhaṇa's Rājataranginị̄: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1979), Vol I, Canto I, verses 17–18.

8. Ibid. Vol. I, Canto I, verses 95 and 101.

9. Ibid. Vol. I, Canto I, verses 102–103.

10. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary,* s.v. *Jina* and *Buddha.*

11. Stein, Vol. I, pp. 74–75.

12. Ibid. Vol. I, Canto I, verses 108–152.

13. Thapar, p. 189.

14. Stein, Vol. I, p. 64.

15. Ibid., p.75. On Śacināra and Śakuṇi, Romila Thapar says: "There is no corroboration of this in any other source. The chronicle has such a confused account of the early kings that it is difficult to accept the statement without further proof." (p. 13, n.6).

16. Stein, Vol. I, p. 75.

17. Beni Madhab Barua, *Aśoka and His Inscriptions,* 2nd. ed. (Calcutta: New Age Publishers, 1955), p. 2. As regards the current usage of *Devānampiya* to be a "fool" it may be traced to Islamic infuence as evinced from the reference to a mentally retarded person by such terms as a "God's child." As such, this expression could have no relation to Aśoka's popular title.

18. Cf. A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India,* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1956), p. 44: "It is perhaps unjust to maintain that India had no sense of history whatever, but what interest she had in her own past was generally concentrated on the fabulous kings of a legendary golden age, rather than the great empires which had risen and fallen in historical times…. The history of Hindu India, as far as we can reconstruct it, is almost completely lacking in the interesting anecdotes and vivid personalities which enliven the study of history for professional and amateur historians alike."

19. Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature,* trans.

by V. Sirinivasa Sarma (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1983), Vol. II, pp. 266–67.

20. For example, *Divyāvadāna,* which is recognized to be of Sarvāstivāda origin, contains concepts which are contrary to those upheld by later schools of Buddhism such as the goal of Arahanthood rather than the Bodhisattva ideal. Further, a collection of stories of the name *Apadāna* is one of the books of the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Pali Canon.

21. *Vinaya Piṭakaṃ,* Vol. II (Culla Vagga), edited by H. Oldenberg. (London: PTS, 1977), pp. 298 ff. See also G.P. Malalasekara, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names,* s. v.

22. A possible explanation for the omission of Upagupta from Theravāda records would be that Upagupta moved to the Sarvāstivāda school of Buddhism and became recognized as the Fourth Patriarch. Cf. E.J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought* (London: Kegan Paul, 1933), p. 30. The early Indian historians considered Upagupta to be another name for Moggaliputta Tissa and ascribed the *Kathāvatthu* to him. Cf. *Cambridge History of India,* Vol. I, p. 498. See also K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, p. 206, n.2. Cf. Malalasekera, s.v. Moggaliputta Tissa.

23. *Divyāvadāna,* edited by P.L. Vaidya (Dharbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1959), p. 232. Cowell and Neil edition, p. 369.

24. Ibid., p. 264 (C & N ed., p. 414), verse 142.

25. Ibid., pp. 234–35 (C & N ed., pp. 372–73).

26. Ibid., p. 235 (C & N ed., pp. 373–74).

27. Ibid., p. 236 (C & N ed., p. 375).

28. Ibid., p. 238 (C & N ed., pp. 378 ff).

29. Ibid., pp. 239–40 (C & N ed., pp. 379–80).

30. Ibid., p. 279 (C & N ed., p. 429).

31. Ibid., p. 279 (C & N ed., p. 429).

32. Ibid:, pp. 248 ff. (C & N ed., pp. 389 ff).

33. Ibid., pp. 279 ff. (C & N ed., pp. 429 ff).

34. Alexander Cunningham, *Mahābodhi,* p. 70, quoted in Barua, p. 30.

35. Joseph Edkins, *Chinese Buddhism,* Trübner's Oriental Series, (London: Kegan Paul, 1893), p. 150.

36. Ibid, pp. 104–105.

37. On an analysis of the Sri Lankan tradition, Wilhelm Geiger observed: "We see that the history of India, as far as it was of importance for understanding the development of Buddhism, was taken into account by the Aṭṭhakathā (i.e. the Sinhala Commentary)…. We can, therefore, infer that the history of Nanda princes, that of the origin of the Moriya dynasty, of the descent of Candagutta and his ascent to the throne occur in the Aṭṭhakathā both of Uttaravihāra and of the Mahāvihāra": *The Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvaṃsa and Their Historical Development in Ceylon* (Colombo: Govt. Press, 1908), p. 57.

38. The nearest to Avadānas on Aśoka in the Pali literature are the three stories in the Sīhalavatthuppakaraṇa: XXX, LXXXII and LIII. The first is an episode ascribed to the reign of Aśoka while the other two only mention the past lives of two monks of Sri Lanka during Aśoka's reign. See Jacqueline Ver Ecke: *Le Sīhaḷavatthuppakaraṇa: Text*

Pali et Traduction, L'Ecole française d'êxtreme orient, Vol. CXXVIII, Paris, 1989.

39. These digressions detracted the value of these accounts in the eyes of the early scholars who expressed their impatience as if the authors were obliged to be unbiased and objective historians. It was hardly conceded that their goal was not so much to record history as to propagate the central teachings of their religion. The law of karma found a convenient point of entry in every story where the reason for a good or bad experience could be traced to wholesome or unwholesome action in the previous birth. Once these compulsive digressions are recognized for their true purpose, the analysis of these accounts for the historical kernel becomes a very useful exercise.

40. See note 37. This ancient commentary had been very closely followed in the *Dīpavaṃsa, Mahāvaṃsa* and *Samantapāsādikā.* The author of the *Mahāvaṃsa Ṭīkā,* written circa 1000 A.C., appears to have had access to it and hence its disappearance has to be dated subsequent to this period. For a discussion on the Sinhala Commentary and its historicity, see Geiger, pp. 44 ff.

41. At first these were written in Sinhala. Later translated into Pali or modifed following the Sinhala models, *Mahābodhivaṃsa, Dāṭhāvaṃsa* and *Thūpavaṃsa* became the forerunners of a branch of historical literature which was continued in Burma with works like *Sāsanavaṃsa* and *Gandhavaṃsa,* and in Thailand with those like *Jinakālamālī.* See Winternitz, II, pp. 210 ff.

42. For example, *Jinakālamālī,* an historical work in Pali, written

by Ratanapala of Thailand in 1517, gives a one page account of Aśoka which summarizes accurately the main information contained in the Sri Lankan sources. Neither distance nor time has interfered with the consistency of the details.

43. *Vinaya Piṭakaṃ,* Vol. I (Mahāvagga), edited by H. Oldenberg (London: PTS, 1969), p. 1ii.

44. Discussed in my article, "Emperor Aśoka and Buddhism: Some Unresolved Discrepancies in Buddhist Tradition and Aśokan Inscriptions." See, in particular, note 11, above pp. 62–63.

45. Thapar, p. 2.

46. Ibid., p. 42. This level of critical objectivity is not seen in Romila Thapar's belaboured argument that Jalauka of *Rājatarangiṇī* was the same as Kuṇāla. See p. 189.

47. As stated in note 42 the original tradition first recorded in Sri Lankan Pali sources is found without any change in all acounts of the Third Council and of the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, found in chronicles of the Theravāda countries. The discovery of manuscripts of an extended version of the *Mahāvaṃsa* in Khmer script in Paris and Colombo is indicative of the prevalence of Sri Lankan chronicles in Southeast Asia. See E. Hardy, "Kambodian Mahāvaṃsa," JRAS (1902), p. 171: JPTS (1902–1903), pp. 61 ff.

48. Mhv., V, 62–72. Cf. MRE I: "I have been a Buddhist layman for more than two and a half years but for a year I did not make much progress. Now for more than a year

I have drawn closer to the Sangha and have become more ardent." Thapar, p. 259.

49. Mhv., V, 78. All Buddhist sources, Pali and Sanskrit, speak of 84,000 Vihāras. Sanskrit sources call them Dharmarājikas. The Vihara ascribed to Aśoka in Taxila is known as Dharmarājika Vihāra. Chinese tradition gives the figure as 80,000. Cf. Edkins, p. 105.

50. Mhv., V, 201–206; XIII–XX. The most controversial issue among Aśokan scholars has been the identity and authenticity of Mahinda and Saṅghamittā. Their names as well as their roles and achievements have been mentioned only in Sri Lankan sources. Traditions recorded by Chinese pilgrims have introduced further confusions. Early scholars, who had no idea of the Buddhist practice of renaming persons entering the Sangha, considered the name Sanghamittā (a friend of the Sangha) to be a later fabrication. Cf. names like Sanghadāsi (Jataka VI, p. 481 and Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā I, p. 396), Sanghadāyikā (Apadāna II, p. 655) and Sanghā (Therīgāthā, verse 18). These were names of people who were not adherents of Buddhism.

51. Both the Sri Lankan Pali sources and those of the Northern Buddhists (e.g. *Divyāvadāna)* agree on the figure 96 crores as the sum spent by Aśoka on his massive programme of constructing Vihāras, etc. Mhv., V, 79–80. Regarding the impact of his generosity on the Sangha, see V, 228–56.

52. Mhv., XII, XVIII, XIX.

53. MRE XIII

54. H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (London, 1920). See also his *A Short History of the World* (London: Pelican, 1922), pp. 94–95.

55. Radha Kumud Mookerji, *Aśoka,* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1972), pp. 1–2. Barua further compared Aśoka to Darius, Xerxes and St. Paul; pp. 329 ff.

56. D.C. Vijayavardhana, *The Revolt in the Temple* (Colombo: Sinha, 1953), p. 557.

57. Jawaharalal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London: Meridian, 1960), p. 39.

58. Ibid., p. 123. Section XXI, pp. 121–24, constitutes one of the most inspiring appreciations of Aśoka written in modern times.

59. Vijayavardhana, pp. 47–48.

60. Quoted in Ibid., p. 558.

61. Quoted in Ibid., p. 559.

62. E. Senart, *Inscriptions de Piyadasi* 2, 231 quoted in T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1971), p. 276.

63. Sylvain Levi, *Journal des Savants* (1905), p. 539, quoted in Winternitz, II, p. 209.

64. Rhys Davids, p. 275.

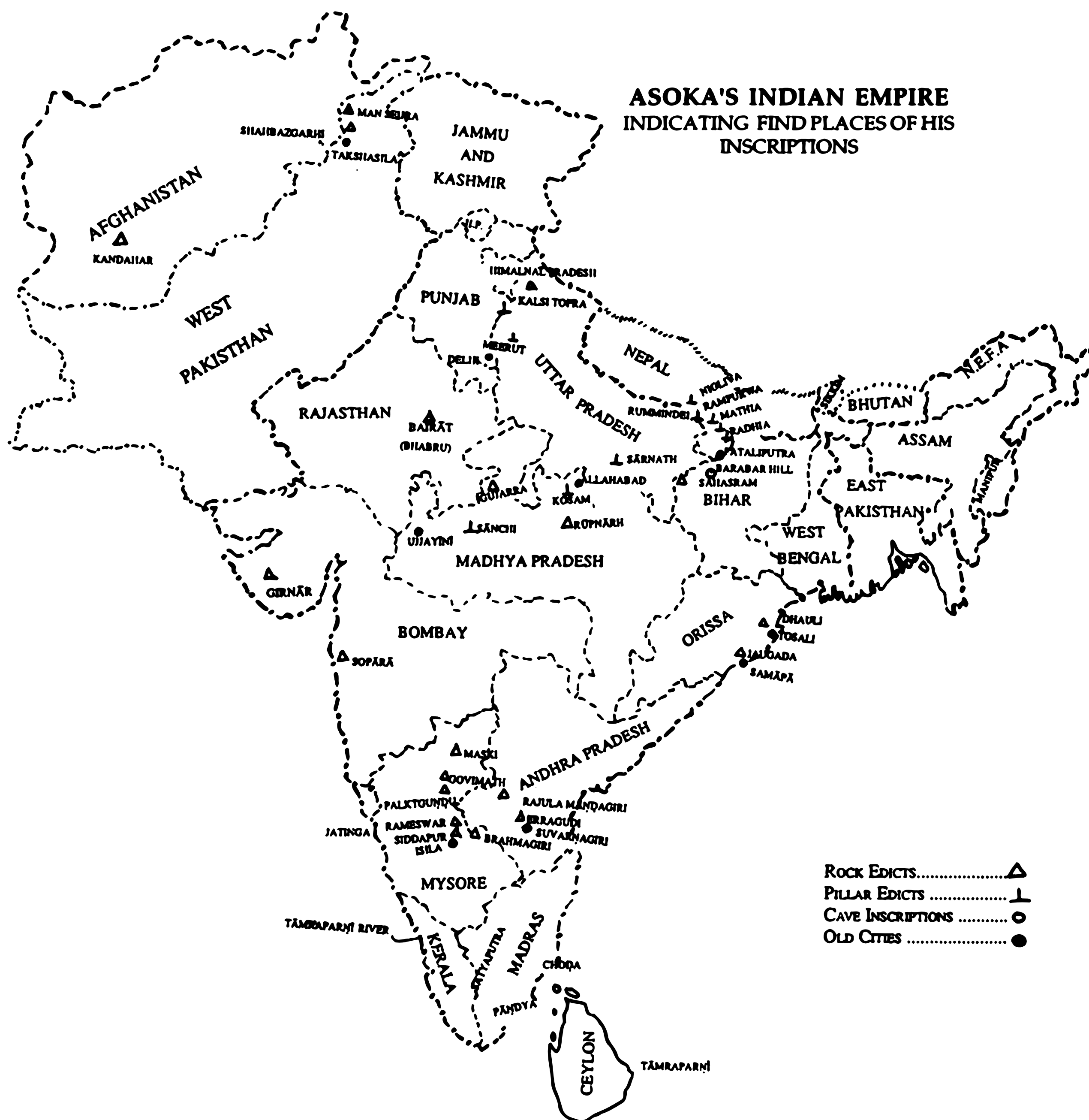
65. Winternitz, II, p. 209, n. 1.

66. Sukumar Dutt, *The Buddha and Five After-Centuries,* (London: Luzac, 1957), p. 157. Dutt does not, however, give reasons for his assumption that the Schism Edicts should have referred to the Third Buddhist Council. What if the Council was long afer these admonitions?

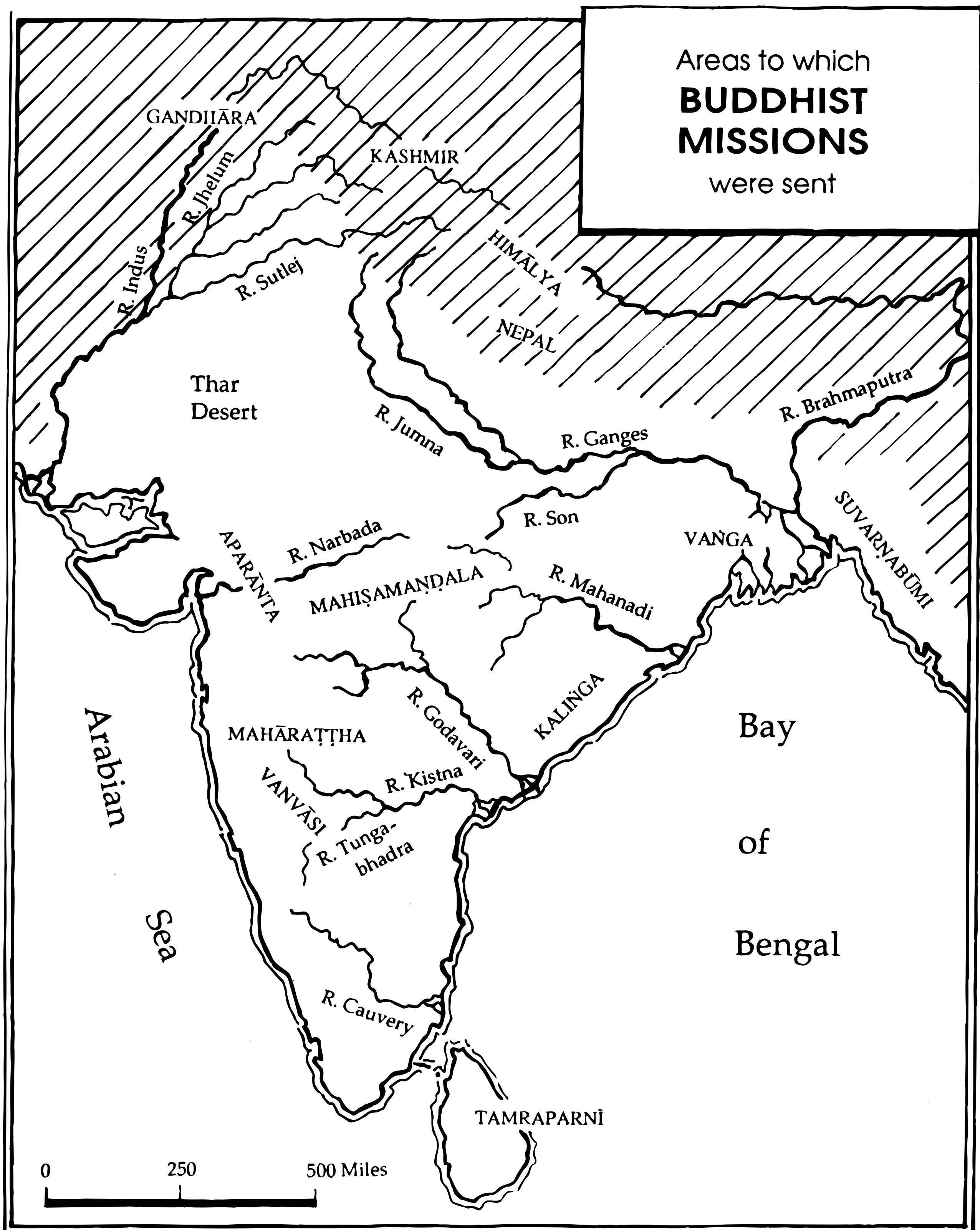
The chronological constraints have often been overlooked by writers like Dutt. They also assume that *all* epigraphical records of Aśoka have been discovered!

67. Ibid., p. 157, n. 21.
68. Ibid., p. 163.
69. Ibid., pp. 157–58.
70. Vincent A. Smith, *Early History of India* (4th. ed.), p. 169, quoted in Dutt, p. 157, n. 22.
71. Vincent A. Smith, *Aśoka* (2nd. ed.), p. 92, quoted in Dutt, p. 157, n. 22. See also Romila Thapar, p. 148: "It has been suggested that Aśoka was the ecclesiastical head of the Sangha, but this suggestion remains unproven." But she also states: "It is possible that the Buddhist clergy acknowledged him as their temporal head," p. 37.
72. Dutt, p. 161.
73. Ibid., p. 162.
74. Ibid., p. 157.
75. Ibid., p. 155.
76. Ibid., p. 156.
77. Barua, Part II. It is noted that this most informative work on Aśoka's Inscriptions has not been consulted by Sukumar Dutt. It is not included in his bibliography.
78. Romila Thapar, p. 203.
79. Ibid., p. 214.
80. Ibid., pp. 1–2.
81. Ibid., p. 217.

82. Ibid., pp. 142–43.
83. Ibid., p. 144.
84. Ibid., p. 144.
85. Ibid., p. 145.
86. Ibid., p. 149.
87. Ibid., p. 149.
88. Ibid., p. 164.
89. Ibid., p. 180.
90. Ibid., p. 181.
91. Ibid., p. 214.
92. Mhv., XX, 1–6, Tissarakkhā's (Sanskrit: Tissayarakṣitā) hostility to the Bodhi Tree is also the theme of Divyāvadana XXVII. Divyāvadana XI is not in any way connected with Aśoka the Emperor and cannot be regarded as reflecting his last days. Aśokavarṇa of this episode has no semblance to Emperor Aśoka.
93. Thapar, pp. 198–99.
94. D.R. Bhandarkar, *Aśoka*, pp. 258 ff., quoted in Barua, pp. 347–48.
95. K.P. Jayaswal: JBORS, Vol. II, p. 83, quoted in Barua, p. 348.
96. H.C. Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India*, p. 304, quoted in Barua, pp. 348–49.
97. See Nilakanta Sastri, pp. 243–48; Barua, pp. 347–55; Thapar, pp. 198–212.
98. Nilakanta Sastri, pp. 247–48.
99. Barua, p. 355.



Aśoka's Indian Empire



Areas to which Buddhist Missions were sent

King Aśoka and Buddhism

Historical and Literary Studies

Edited by
Anuradha Seneviratna